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HIGHLIGHTS

MARIO KART 8 ■ THE DIVISION ■ BORDERLANDS: THE PRE-SEQUEL ■ THE EVIL WITHIN ■ DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION ■ EVOLVE ■ TRANSFORMERS UNIVERSE DEATH OF THE MMO ■ DAYLIGHT ■ LORDS OF THE FALLEN


Looking back at the youth of my life shows many mis-steps that are best left forgotten, let alone dragged up again in a national publication. Overalls. Wallet chains that scraped the floor. Limp Bizkit albums. But no matter how tragic my personal tastes became, as I've bent my persona to fit in with whatever pop culture force is dominant at the time, gaming has been the constant that has never changed. One kid/teenager/man, one console, one comfy seat. Game on.

Gaming will have been a constant for many of you too, as is evident by your purchase of this magazine, but things are going to change whether we like it or not. With Steam machines, VR, Google Glass, wearable tech and Amazon threatening to enter the console arms race, there are a lot of new ingredients being thrown into the gaming mix and no-one can predict the outcome with any degree of confidence. Can VR find mass appeal? Will a new method of input control replicate the impact of Wii and find lasting success with it? Are gaming's days of one kid on one console on one seat numbered?

Regardless of the answers, there's an interesting mix of games in this issue that shows we're at a crossroads of sort where the past, the present and the future of our industry is coming together – the time-tested mayhem of *Mario Kart 8*, the arcade fury of *Trials Fusion* and the Oculus Rift-supported *Ether One*. So maybe the future doesn't have to be about a choice between the old ways of gaming and a brave new world. Maybe the future can be a blend of the two. Albeit a future with fewer Limp Bizkit albums…

Ryan King
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

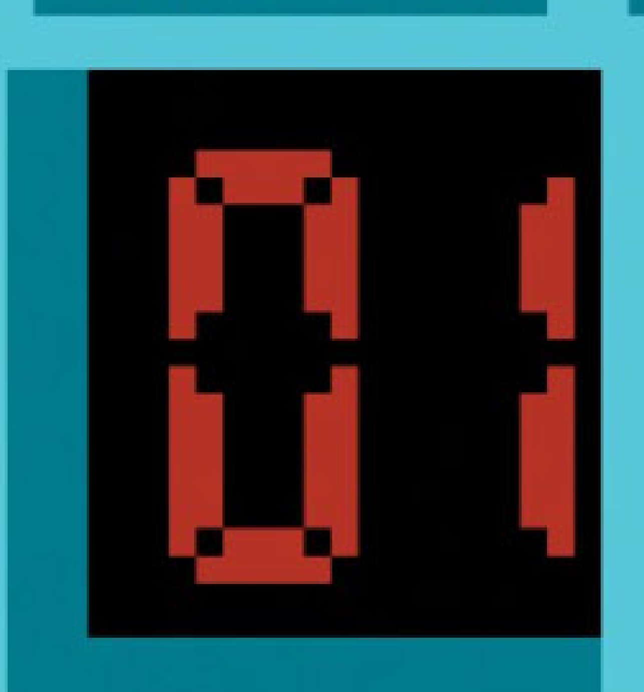
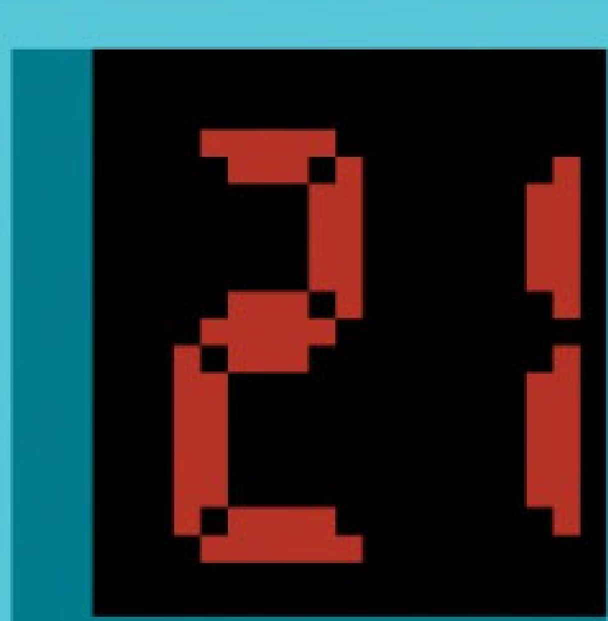
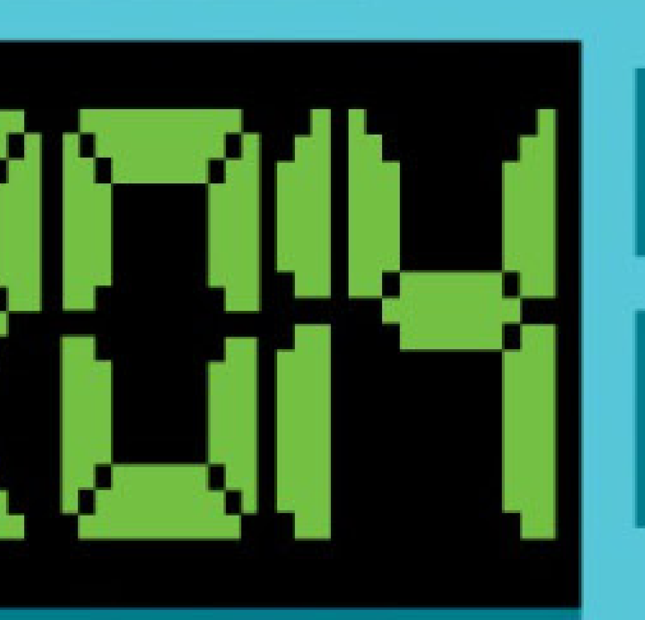


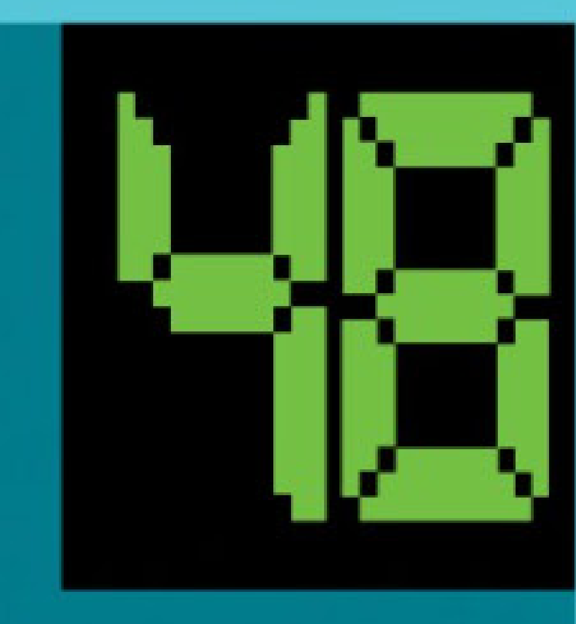


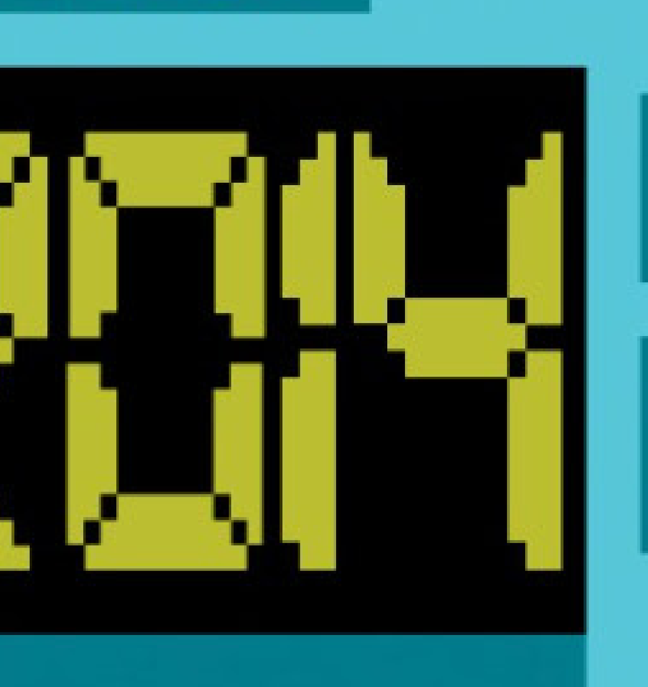
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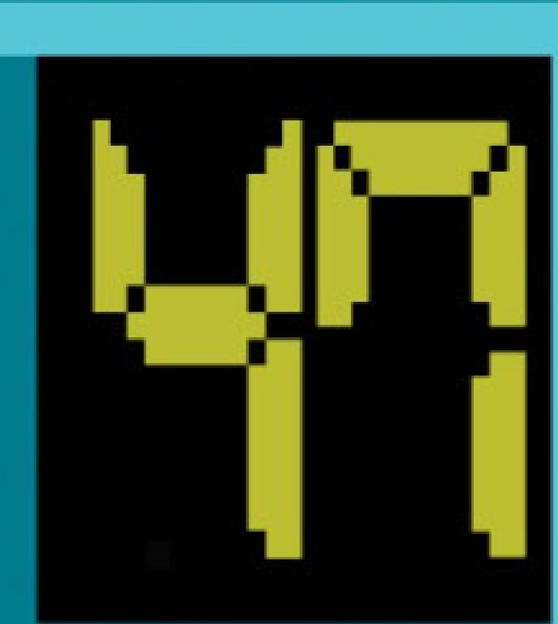






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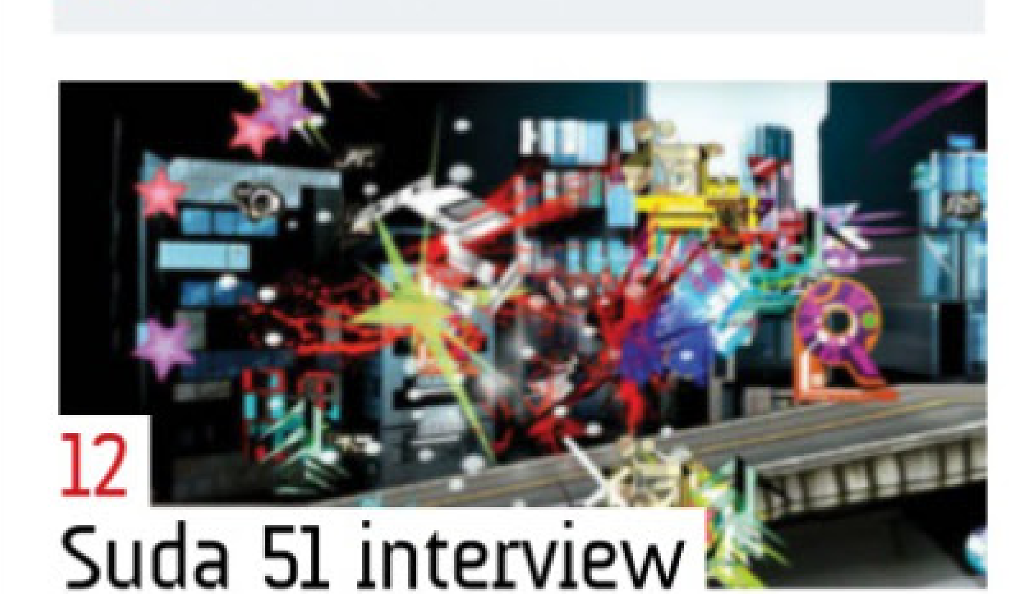
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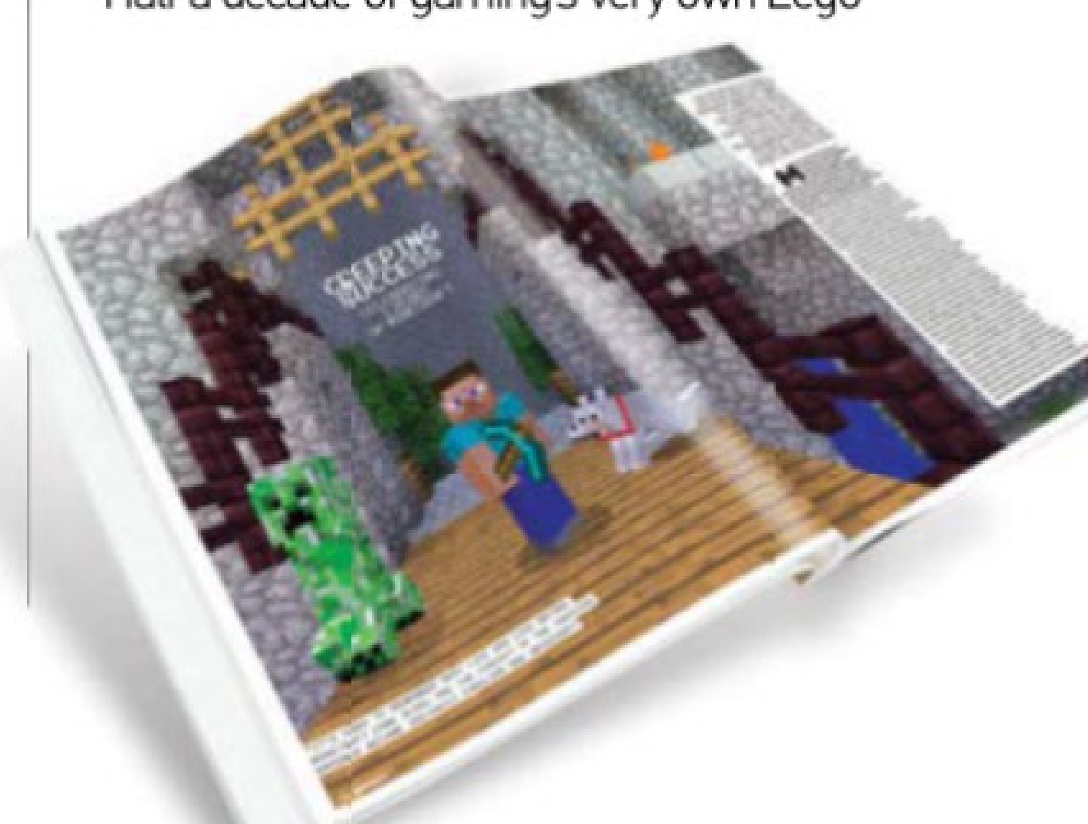
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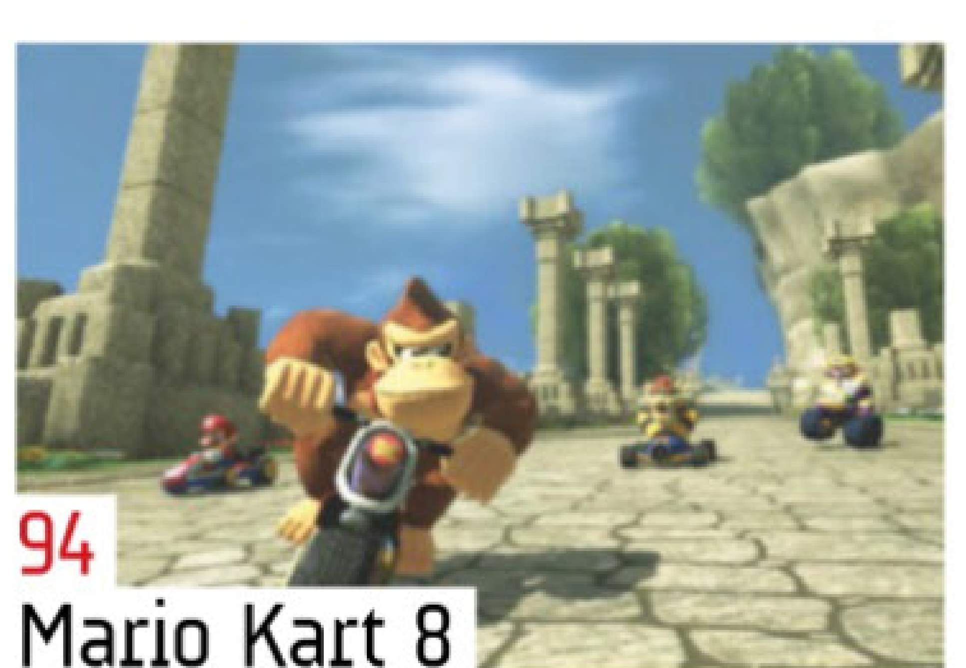
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(PAST FORWARD)

Backwards To The Future

→ Are console manufacturers increasingly looking towards backwards compatibility to bulk out a thin selection of next-gen games?

Summer is almost upon us and the number of new and exclusive games so far released during 2014 for PS4 and Xbox One remain conspicuously slight. Moreover, the number of "must-have" games for both systems has gone from one to zero thanks to the surprisingly capable Xbox 360 edition of *Titanfall*. If its delay was indeed due to a desire to maximise Xbox One sales, which had risen 96% on the back of the game's release, we wouldn't be surprised.

To combat the first-party release drought both manufacturers undoubtedly saw coming, Microsoft and Sony have long been conscripting indie developers to push out new and updated editions of their established games, but even this strategy doesn't seem to be enough as we face a protracted dry season for dedicated next-gen releases. Could backwards compatibility provide some relief until more of the familiar game franchises announce their welcome end-of-year instalments?

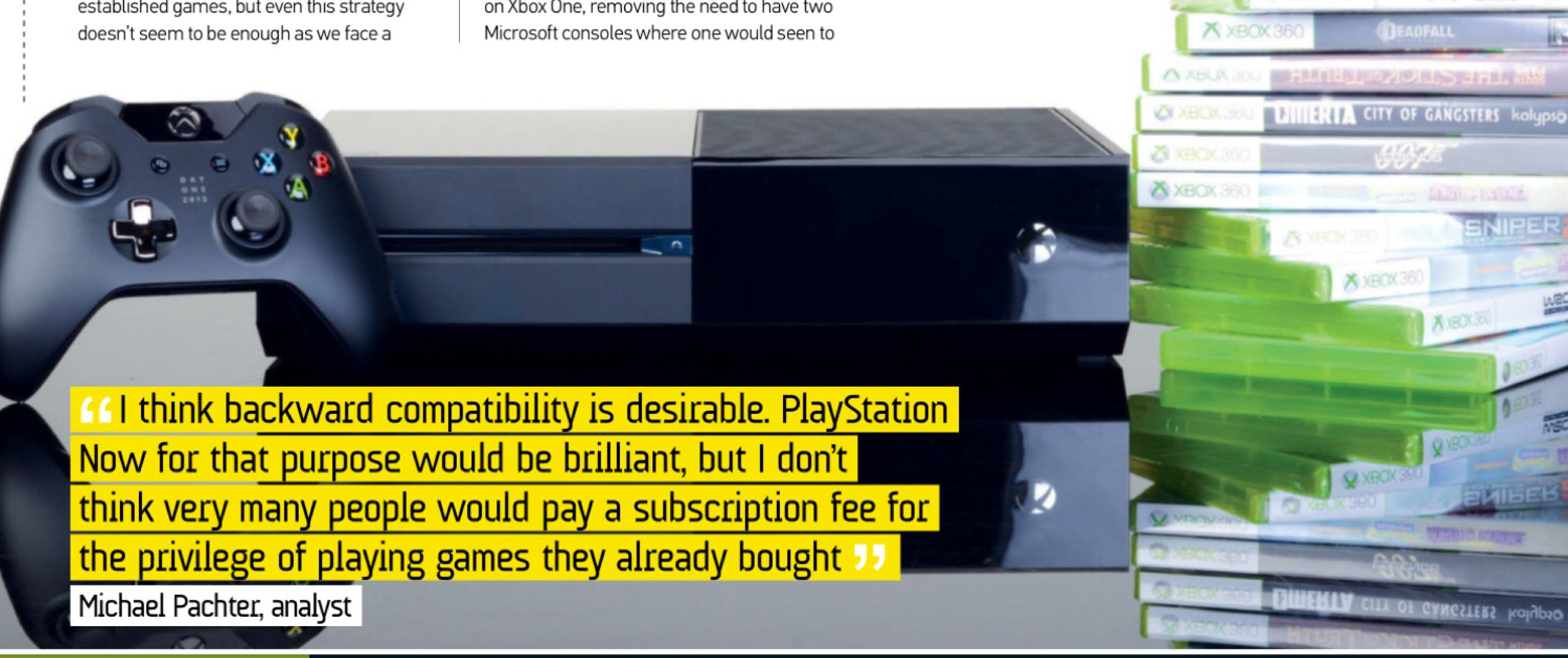
Last year, Microsoft's Don Mattrick, now CEO at Zynga, poured scorn on the likelihood of Xbox 360 compatibility being a feature of the then-unreleased Xbox One, telling the Wall Street Journal that "if you're backwards compatible, you're really backwards." Less than a year later those are among the last of the ex-Xbox chief's words still to be eaten and there are signs that Microsoft is considering one more U-turn, with Xbox partner developer Frank Savage revealing in March that there are internal discussions being held on the matter of emulating Xbox 360 games on Xbox One, removing the need to have two Microsoft consoles where one would seen to be preferable for most people. So far it would seem those discussions have not become solid plans: "We're not done thinking them through yet, unfortunately," said Savage. "It turns out to be hard to emulate the PowerPC [360] stuff on the [Xbox One] X86 stuff. So there's nothing to announce, but I would love to see [backwards compatibility] myself."



Above Michael Pachter discusses the value of last-gen hardware.

Microsoft has since come out to hose down rising hopes that Xbox One 360 emulation might be close at hand, reiterating the "super challenging" difficultly in bridging the two Xbox systems. When we asked Microsoft for comment, a spokesperson said there was nothing further to share on the matter. "We care very much about the investment people have made in Xbox 360 and will continue to support it with a pipeline of new games and new apps well into the future." In short, whether backwards compatibility is on an informal wish list or scheduled to be a *thing*, Microsoft will be sure to let us know how it gets on in the fullness of time.

GIVEN HOW PATCHY and half-hearted backwards compatibility was between the original Xbox and the Xbox 360, perhaps we shouldn't get our hopes up, but there



"I think backward compatibility is desirable. PlayStation Now for that purpose would be brilliant, but I don't think very many people would pay a subscription fee for the privilege of playing games they already bought"

Michael Pachter, analyst

DATA STREAM → KEVIN SPACEY STARS IN THE LATEST CALL OF DUTY IN FULL HOUSE OF CARDS MODE



is a fundamental difference in the console changeover this generation compared to last, in that there is plenty of life left in the Xbox 360 and PS3 in spite of their enforced senescence. Even with next-gen exclusives finally appearing on the horizon, among them *Batman: Arkham Knight* and *Assassin's Creed: Unity*, publishers are more than happy to push new games towards the old hardware on account of their vast user bases. With 170m Xbox 360 and PS3s in circulation compared to less than 10m Xbox One and PS3 machines, is it any wonder that EA is playing it safe with *FIFA World Cup* and 2K Games likewise with the recently announced *Borderlands* prequel sequel?

"I think that the difference this time around, compared to last cycle," says analyst Michael Pachter, "is that the legacy consoles have relatively high value – so they are worth something on trade in – and companies like Take-Two keep pumping out games on legacy consoles only." Citing the release of *Grand Theft Auto V* last autumn and *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* this year as indicative of the combined staying power of the Xbox 360 and PS3, Pachter continues: "That's a combination that creates a need for backward compatibility, with more people trading in old consoles – due to high value – and more people wanting new games that are legacy console exclusive. We didn't really have that problem in the last cycle, as few games were legacy exclusive."

Above Nintendo's Virtual Console has been trading on nostalgia for years.

Below Sony is currently establishing its own comprehensive online back catalogue.

Pachter believes it isn't simply a case that new games are continuing to be produced for Xbox 360 and PS3 that necessitates some measure of next-gen backwards compatibility, but that older games, such as the *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* series, continue to be played in greater numbers than their next-gen successors. "Multiplayer further complicates matters" he says, "since games have longer lives in 2014 than they did in 2007, on average. Multiplayer existed in 2007, but its prevalence in games has probably tripled since then." Could it be that the huge growth of online multiplayer gaming since the onset of Xbox Live has helped not just prolong the life of the 360 and PS3, but hindered the adoption of their successors? On the basis of how well next-gen hardware sales have been going thus far, for Sony especially, it's hard to see a direct correlation, but with triple-A games still on the PS3/360 release schedule and lingering multiplayer interest in games that this time last generation would have been gathering dust, it's hard to argue the case wholly against backwards compatibility.

WHILE THE HARDWARE and emulation challenges are entirely similar for PS4 as they are for Xbox One – in that both next-gen machines are very different beasts from their predecessors, Sony has traditionally been more open to allowing its back catalogue of games in from the cold, just so long as people are prepared to pay for the privilege. To that end, Sony is approaching the issue of backwards compatibility from a wholly different angle, avoiding the physical media problems entirely and supplanting them with a range of cloud-based streaming issues. PlayStation →








Inset Backwards compatibility has been a contentious issue since the announcement of next-gen.

Now is to be the solution and will require a high-speed broadband or cable connection with game content streamed not from pre-owned discs but via the Gaikai server infrastructure that Sony paid $380m for back in July 2012. The service is currently undergoing beta testing in the US and is hoped to be launched towards the end of the year, and while the idea of playing previous and current generation PlayStation games available to PS4 users appeals a great deal, Sony may have difficulty convincing veteran fans to re-invest in a digital back-catalogue, especially when access to purchases may be limited by the quality of one's internet connection.

"I think backward compatibility is desirable," says analyst Michael Pachter. "PlayStation Now for that purpose would be brilliant, but I don't think very many people would pay a subscription fee for the privilege of playing games they already bought." As an aside, the interesting potential for PlayStation Now is that whilst it's being pitched as a service for Playstation 4 owners, in time it will be backwards compatible in itself, available across PS3, Vita, select smart TVs and touchscreen devices.

While the focus to provide next-gen access to legacy games is on Microsoft and Sony, Nintendo, arguably the weakest of the three console manufacturers in terms of its future games line-up, has of course been pursuing a policy of backwards compatibility for years via its Virtual Console download service. Moreover, with Virtual Console games easily and freely transferable from Wii to Wii U, the



"Nintendo is doing the right thing, but the small installed base of Wii U owners is going to keepit from making a big impact"

Michael Pachter, analyst

Inset PS Now proposes to steam a range of Sony titles to a multitude of devices.



AMERICAN MCGEE MAKES THE REASONABLE PREDICTION THAT "XBOX ONE WILL FAIL IN CHINA"



Inset: The heads of Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo agree to disagree on the matter of backwards compatibility.

feeling is that while Nintendo may have gotten a lot wrong in this current console cycle, on this one issue it is far ahead of the competition. In recent weeks the service has been expanded to include the first among what will sure to be an extensive range of Gameboy Advance titles, starting with *Advance Wars*, *Metroid Fusion*, *Yoshi's Island* and *Golden Sun*.

Between the three main console manufacturers "Nintendo is doing the right thing," says Pachter "but the small installed base of Wii U owners is going to keep it from making a big impact." Indeed, it's hard to imagine backwards compatibility, even if it included the entirely of Nintendo's games, tempting a rush of gamers to adopt Nintendo's flagging console, but for Microsoft, lagging behind Sony in the terms of hardware sales and with a lean summer of releases ahead (and it's not looking much better for Sony), it can't do any harm to get gamers on side by tempting them as much with the games they currently have as with the games they want to play in the months ahead. It's all very well Microsoft promising that there'll be "lots to show" at E3 this coming June, but what gamers really want is lots to play, and the sooner the better.

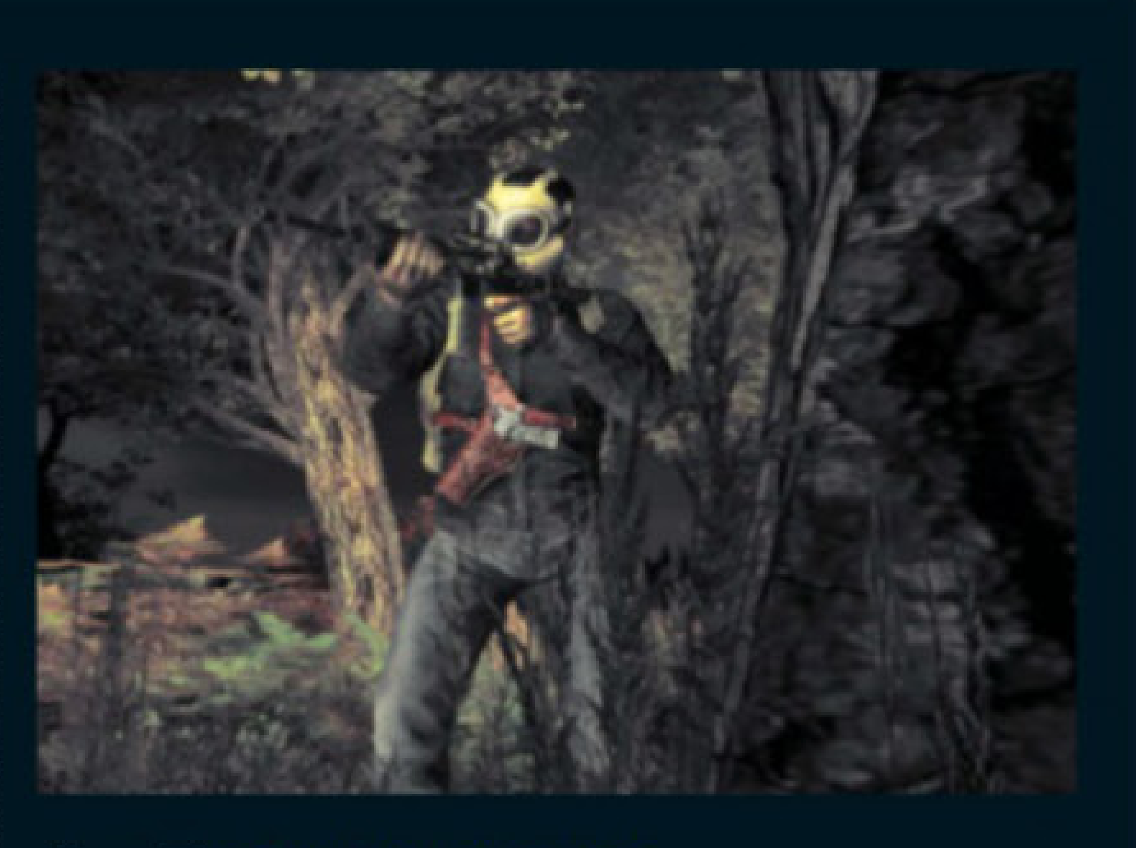


Inset: The original *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* remains far more popular than any next-gen game. It makes sense to be able to play it on our new consoles.

BACKWARDS COMPATIBILITY DONE RIGHT

We take a look at the platforms and companies that have taken the right approach to releasing back catalogue titles to a new generation of gamers



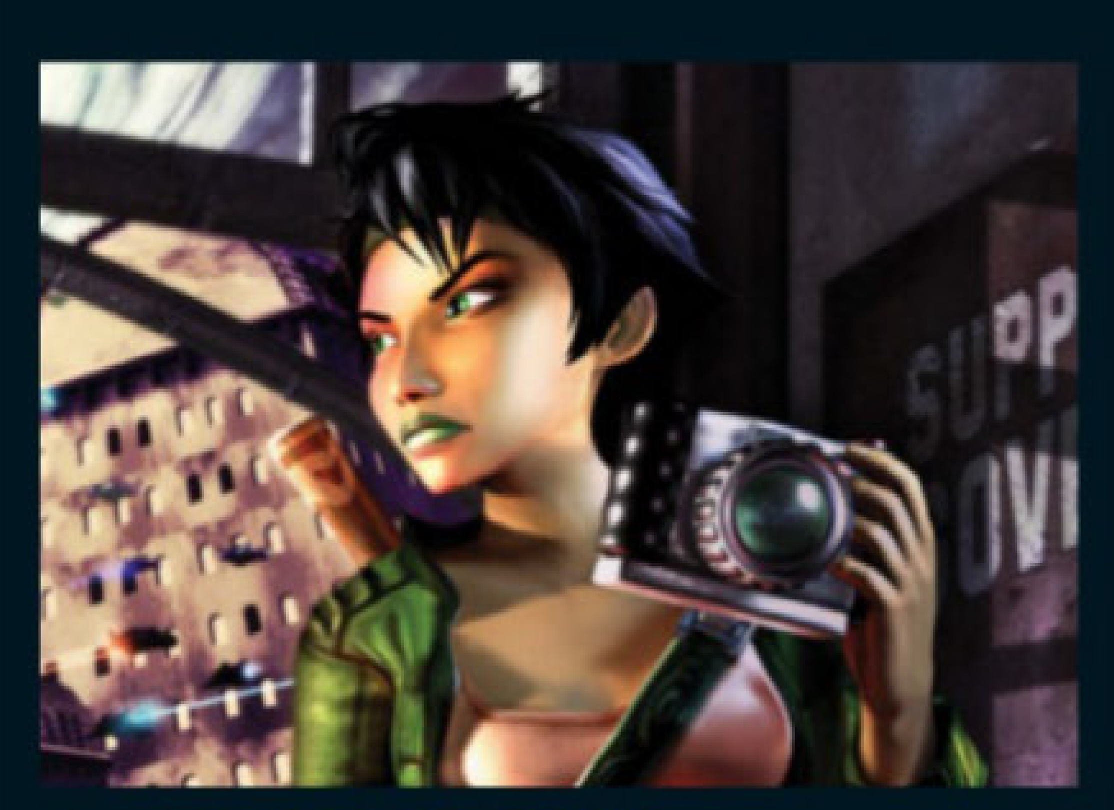


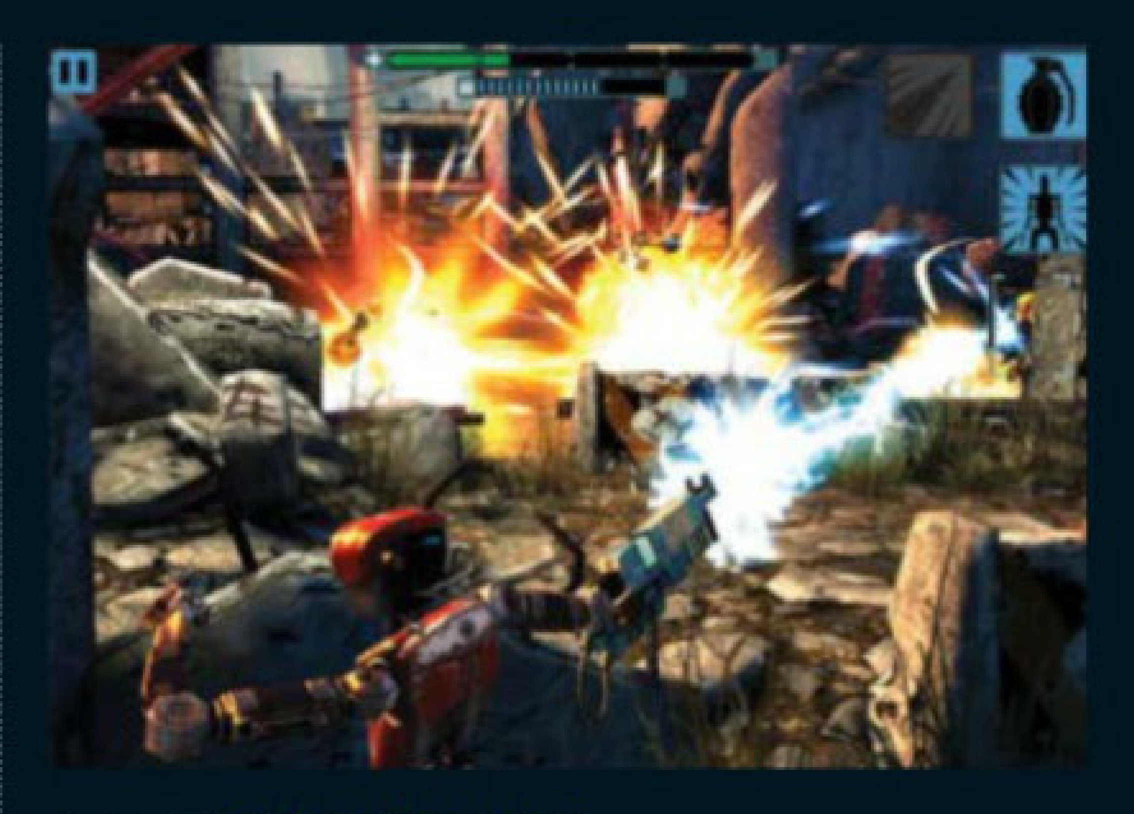
[1] VIRTUAL CONSOLE

With third-party support often falling away and Nintendo relying on established franchises, it's perhaps necessary for Nintendo to offer some form of backwards compatibility with each new generation of hardware. In being able to play GameCube discs and in opening up the Virtual Console download store for the Wii in 2005, Nintendo set the benchmark for backwards compatibility and continues to set a high standard with the Wii U. Making Game Boy Advance titles available was the latest masterstroke – too late to help the Wii U, perhaps, but enough to keep fans on side while it sees out its sunshine years.

[2] STEAM MACHINES

Physical PC games sales have practically died since the launch of Steam more then ten years ago, as millions of PC gamers rely on Valve's client software for almost all of their gaming purchases. With thousands of games on offer, many of them designed for legacy versions of Windows, it's an overlooked triumph of the system that games continue to work on the full range of PCs when their disc-based versions are no longer supported by their publisher. With the release of the full range of Steam Machines starting later this year, never before will a console have launched with so many games to choose from.





[3] GOOD OLD GAMES

Gog.com, the publishing arm of *The Witcher* developer CD Projekt, has been one of the biggest success stories in PC game retailing, not only managing to bring back hundreds of games that were considered lost to the ravages of "abandonware" sites, but doing so without resorting to nefarious forms of digital rights management. The site has grown to become the second biggest digital PC game retailer and it has done so almost entirely by offering backwardly compatible games at reasonable prices, with plenty of side content thrown in to sweeten the deal. A console version of the site would be a wonderful thing, but of course we know it will never happen.

[4] ANDROID / IOS

Given that each smartphone generation seems to last months in comparison to the years that pass between console cycles, it's not surprising that support for legacy games and apps is a constant feature of successive Apple and Android-powered touchscreen devices. We queue up in droves to unbox the latest swipe-screen mini marvel in spite of our current phones and tablets being perfectly serviceable. Would we be so keen if we knew all our current apps and games would be useless, or that we might have to carry around two phones instead of one? Perhaps the key to unlocking its successes is in how viable legacy software remains even many generations of hardware later.



THE XBOX ONE VERSION OF THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN 2 IS CANNED… AND THEN RELEASED





(TAKING OVER THE MARKET)

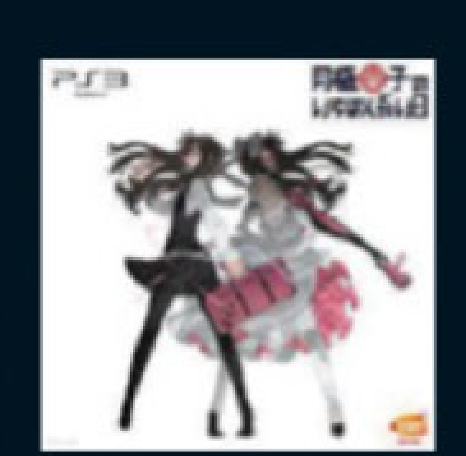
Suda 51 On Games That Aren't Just Games

→ **Last month saw Bandai Namco release Rinko Tsukigime's Longest Day: Short Peace, along with a series of four films that thematically tie in to the game's narrative. It's a cross-media project the industry rarely sees, but will it catch on? We sat down with Suda 51 to discuss...**

L*ongest Day* is a peculiar game – the full gameplay experience clocks in at around two hours, and it presents itself as a score attack momentum platformer; akin to *Bit.Trip Runner* or a 2D *Mirror's Edge*. Over the various levels that comprise the game's core experience, you'll experience a whistle-stop tour through a heavily stylised version of contemporary Japan, a mix of homage and satire on the cultural patterns at play in the country. But the most intriguing part of *Longest Day* is that the game only constitutes one fifth of the product; it sits nestled among four films, each with their own director and internal theme. The first film in the collection, *Possessions*, was nominated for an Oscar at this year's awards, and *Combustible* has Katsuhiro Otomo (famous for his work on *Akira*) on directorial duties – this is not a thoughtless, cheap release. In Japan at least, this is a big project.

"I heard from Uchiyama, a producer at Bandai Namco Games, that [what we've done with *Short Peace*] is a first, and I felt very proud that we created something new," explained Suda - the game's director - when we asked him about what motivated him to jump on-board as a producer for the project. "The theme of all the movies and the game in this title is 'Japan' – each part focusing on different regions of the country. The original Ranko Tsukigime features contemporary Japan, and while I would have preferred to have all the animation in full CGI, time constraints and the collaboration of Kamikazedouga [anime studio] gave an interesting style."

> " I think the method of shipping games as mixed media is very likely to continue in Japan, and I hope the same is true overseas "
>
> Suda 51, director, Short Peace



Above The theme of *Short Peace* is Japan, evident in both game and movies.

BY USING THE theme of Japan, the *Short Peace* boxset has the ability to deconstruct the region and explore each different district in a different way – the cinematic experiences providing a study of the country, while the game offers an interactive element to the cerebral, screen-filling madness you'd expect from something with Suda 51's name attached. "It is an interesting challenge to get animation fans and players together, accepting the kind of concept that *Short Peace* is built around," explains Suda.

With mixed media, an interesting challenge is put forward to the developer – the game a studio is creating isn't just aimed at gamers with projects like these. If a title is released as part of a set with a novel, a comic tie-in, a cinematic accompaniment or even an augmented-reality side-game, developers must remain conscious that their audience possibly aren't going to be the console/PC-based hardcore it would usually be developing for. "The game component of the title was made with the awareness that not everyone that picks up *Short Peace* [will be a gamer] – the balance of the gameplay has been adjusted so that anyone can play until the end, and our priority for the game was to make sure it could be cleared by anyone, rather than fitting to any recent trends".

Short Peace isn't a particularly difficult game, but to its credit, the art direction



Right A scene from one of the films included within the *Short Peace* package – the similarities to the other screenshots on the page (all game shots) gives a sense of cohesion to the whole project.



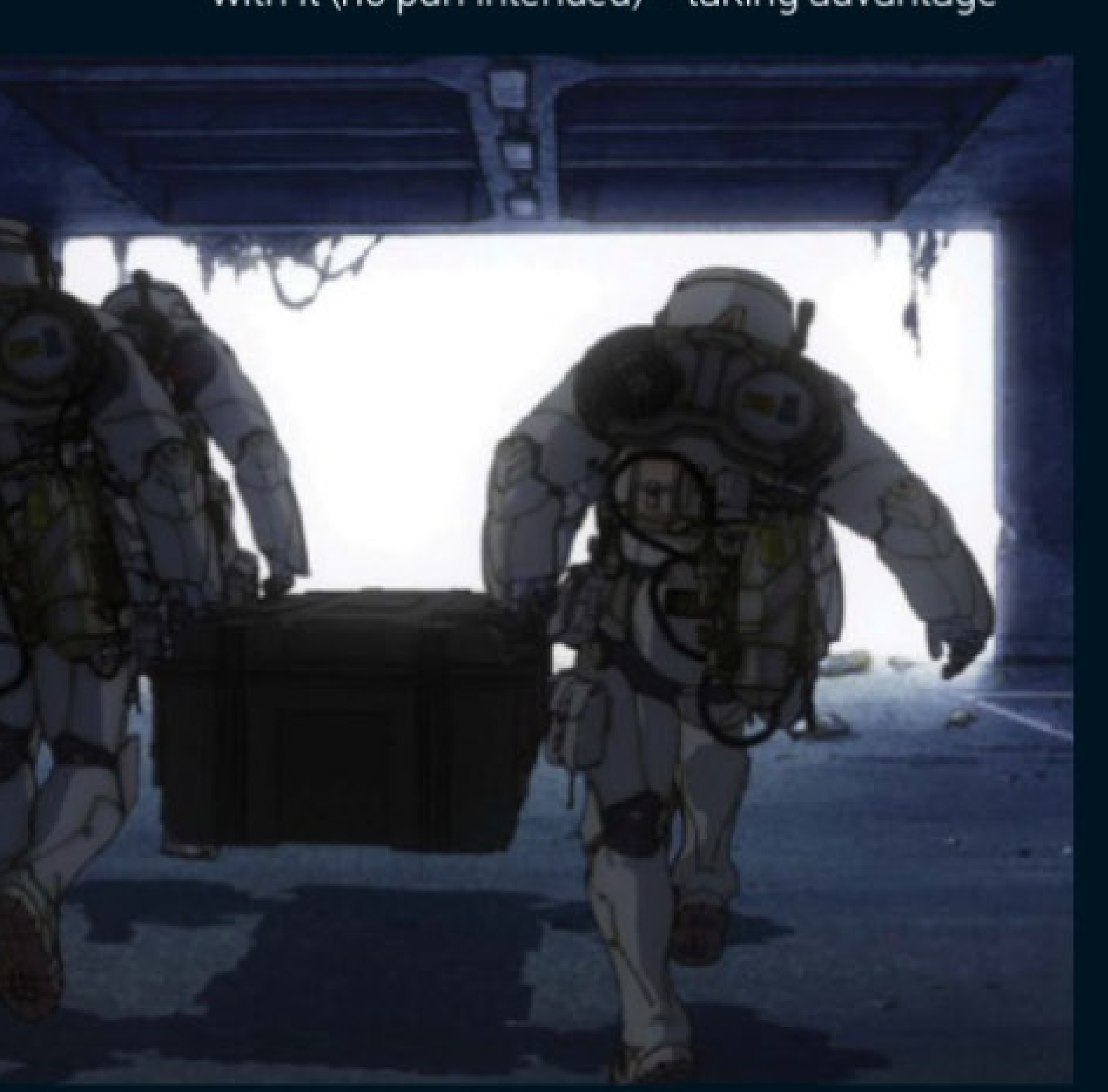
RUMOURS ABOUND THAT SQUARE-ENIX IS PREPARING TO ANNOUNCE JUST CAUSE 3 AT E3



Inset The game is slightly more camp and, well, 'fan service' driven than its filmic partners, but it all ties in with the tone and feel of Short Peace. Still, it makes games look a little immature in comparison.

Inset The cinematic elements of the game release do overshadow the actual gameplay a little. Perhaps, going forward, we'll see the identity of games in mixed media packages become stronger, and more rounded.

and stylistic choices that have been put into the momentum-running side-scroller feel completely in tune with the cinematic experiences the game sits beside. It also takes the genre it operates within and runs with it (no pun intended) – taking advantage of all the tropes a momentum-runner can exploit. A potential problem with games released as component parts of a greater whole is that they have the potential to become the main focus – a film is a two-hour engagement, a novel doesn't have the same interaction or focus on agency a game does, and each require different methods of production (with games traditionally seeing development cycles of two to three years).

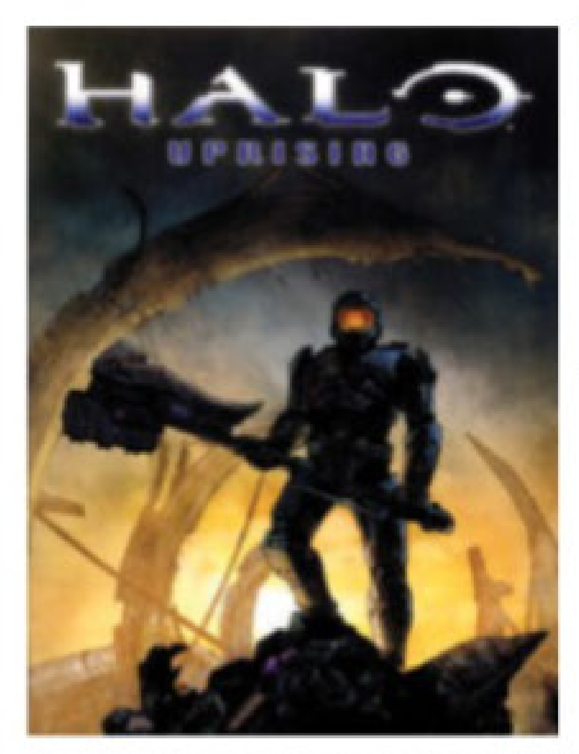


If, going forward, we're going to start producing games whose experiences extend further than the content behind the boxart, then an extremely delicate balance will have to be struck – developers will have to figure out the equilibrium between what they want consumers to take from their games, and what they want consumers to take from their products. "*Short Peace* has been an interesting challenge," concludes Suda, "and I think the method of shipping games as mixed media is very likely to continue in Japan, and I hope the same is true overseas."

BEYOND THE BOXART

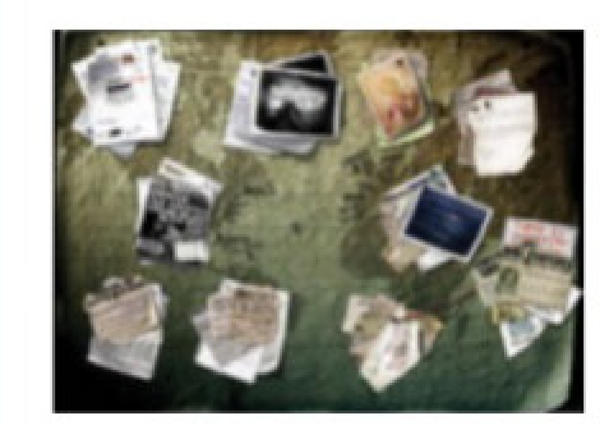
Many development teams have gone out of their way to provide a more complete experience that extends beyond the confines of the joypad. Some have been successful, others… less so

HALO COMICS



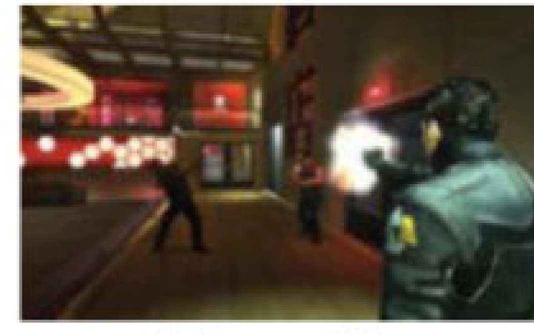
■ There have been a lot of franchises that have used comics to flesh out their game worlds – and why not? Both allow their audiences to soak up the visual splendour of the worlds they're set in while having the means to deliver succinct and engaging dialogue together, and both have the capability to be delivered episodically, with a tight focus on lore and world-building. The *Halo* comics made our list over other comic tie-ins as the series manages to keep the mythology of the *Halo* world artfully intact, while being different enough from the games to be worthwhile.

'THERE'S SOMETHING IN THE SEA'



■ Mark Meltzer was a fictional reporter in the *BioShock* universe, intrigued and obsessed with the disappearance of young girls from cities on the coastlines of the Atlantic ocean. He wasn't a real person, of course, but that didn't stop 2K from launching a sort-of augmented-reality game that tasked players with hunting down clues for themselves over three 'phases' of a website's lifespan. The event was topped off by 2K launching bottles with in-game posters and propaganda into oceans around the world. It all felt very staged, but it was the first step in a brave direction for the company.

SKIES OF ARCADIA'S 'PINTA QUEST'



■ Probably the best use of the Dreamcast's VM, the *Pinta Quest* was a lite-RPG that you could download to the console's Visual Memory and take out and about with you, prolonging the life of the game and showing you the Jules Verne-inspired fantasy world through the eyes of a young, wannabe sailor. Items and cash earned in the side-quest could be imported back to your main game too, making the whole endeavour satisfyingly worthwhile.

STAR WARS: SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE



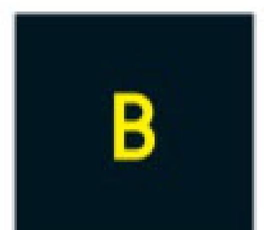
■ An experience that was released over three formats – a game, a comic and a novel – *Shadows Of The Empire* formed a complete experience only when you played the game, read the comics and read the book. But if you *really* wanted to get involved with the game, there were also trading cards, model kits, live-action role playing games, soundtracks and designer toys to collect. You'd be bankrupted by the end.

DARK SOULS DEVELOPER FROM SOFTWARE HAS BEEN BOUGHT BY JAPANESE PUBLISHER KADOKAWA

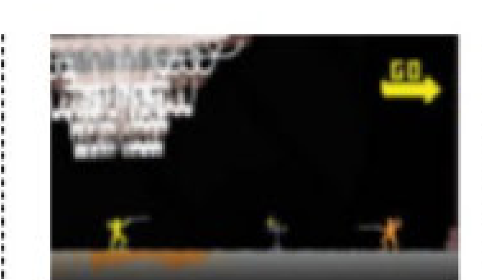
(THE LOCAL GAME FOR LOCAL PEOPLE)

The Death of Local Multiplayer

→ In the wake of Mario Kart 8 and Super Smash Bros. Brawl's impending releases, **gamesTM** takes the time to step back and look at what happened to the once vibrant culture of local multiplayer, and what could potentially replace the oft-maligned splitscreen



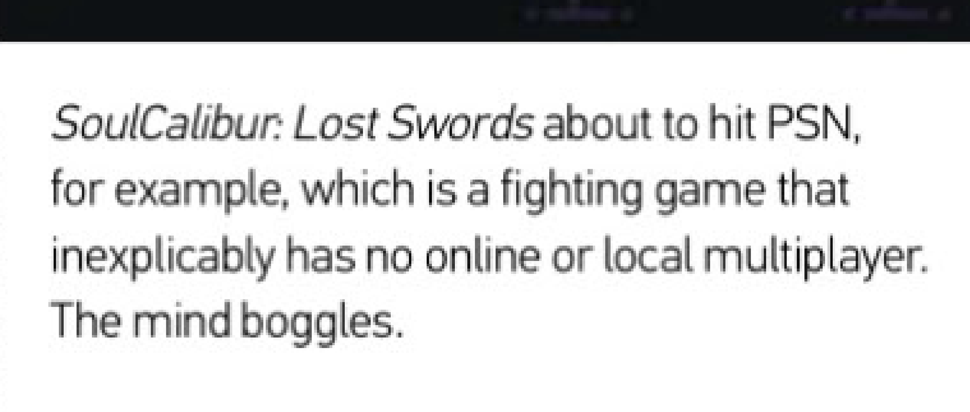
Back in the days of the 16-bit console, it was almost mandatory for a game to ship with a multiplayer option. If you'd taken the plunge and invested in two pads for your console, you expected to use them. The whole idea of local co-op originated in the arcade cabinets of yore, the vast majority of which came with a pair of joysticks so friends (or enemies) could engage with their favourite games together, either co-operatively blasting their way through levels at a time, or going toe-to-toe to gun for the highest score on the leaderboard, and the associated bragging rights that came with them.



Above Despite its simple appearance, *Nidhogg* has one of the deepest and most satisfying local multiplayer options in any of the games that have launched in the last year or so.



For many, the highlight of local multiplayer history rests with the Nintendo 64, specifically with *GoldenEye* – the four-player splitscreen the game is infamous for is widely considered one of the most innovative additions players saw on a console game; in many ways, it laid the foundation for the shooters we now see saturating the console market. So what happened? At one point in the not too distant past, it would have been considered taboo to release a game without some semblance of local co-op or multiplayer, yet now we're seeing titles ship on an almost daily basis that forgo the age-old convention in favour of more new-fangled multiplayer options. Bandai Namco has the upcoming fighter *SoulCalibur: Lost Swords* about to hit PSN, for example, which is a fighting game that inexplicably has no online or local multiplayer. The mind boggles.



THE METEORIC RISE of the PS3's and Xbox 360's live services have certainly had an impact on how gamers see local multiplayer – last-gen truly was the generation of the FPS, and while the *Call Of Duty*, *Halo* and the other big hitting types did have campaigns that allowed co-op or side-missions that friends could play in tandem, the focus was heavily on the online component. Since then, we've seen a general decline in games featuring support for more than one pad – an oddity when you consider most console gamers tend to have two or more controllers sitting around their houses. Local multiplayer has advantages that online multiplayer doesn't, too – for example, we've recently seen Gamespsy shut down its online servers, affecting 800+ publishers and rocking the online multiplayer of games like *Red Dead Redemption*, *Crysis*, a slew of *Tom Clancy* games and the original *Halo*. While server shutdowns like this can be unavoidable, if the current trend of online-only multiplayer continues, we're likely to see a scenario in the future where 50% of all retro games are unplayable, because the servers have been shut down and there's no way of hosting a game to play. You won't get that with *GoldenEye*.

Luckily, local multiplayer isn't a facet of gaming that's threatened to get buried completely under the sands of time – Nintendo, as ever, is keen to keep the idea of



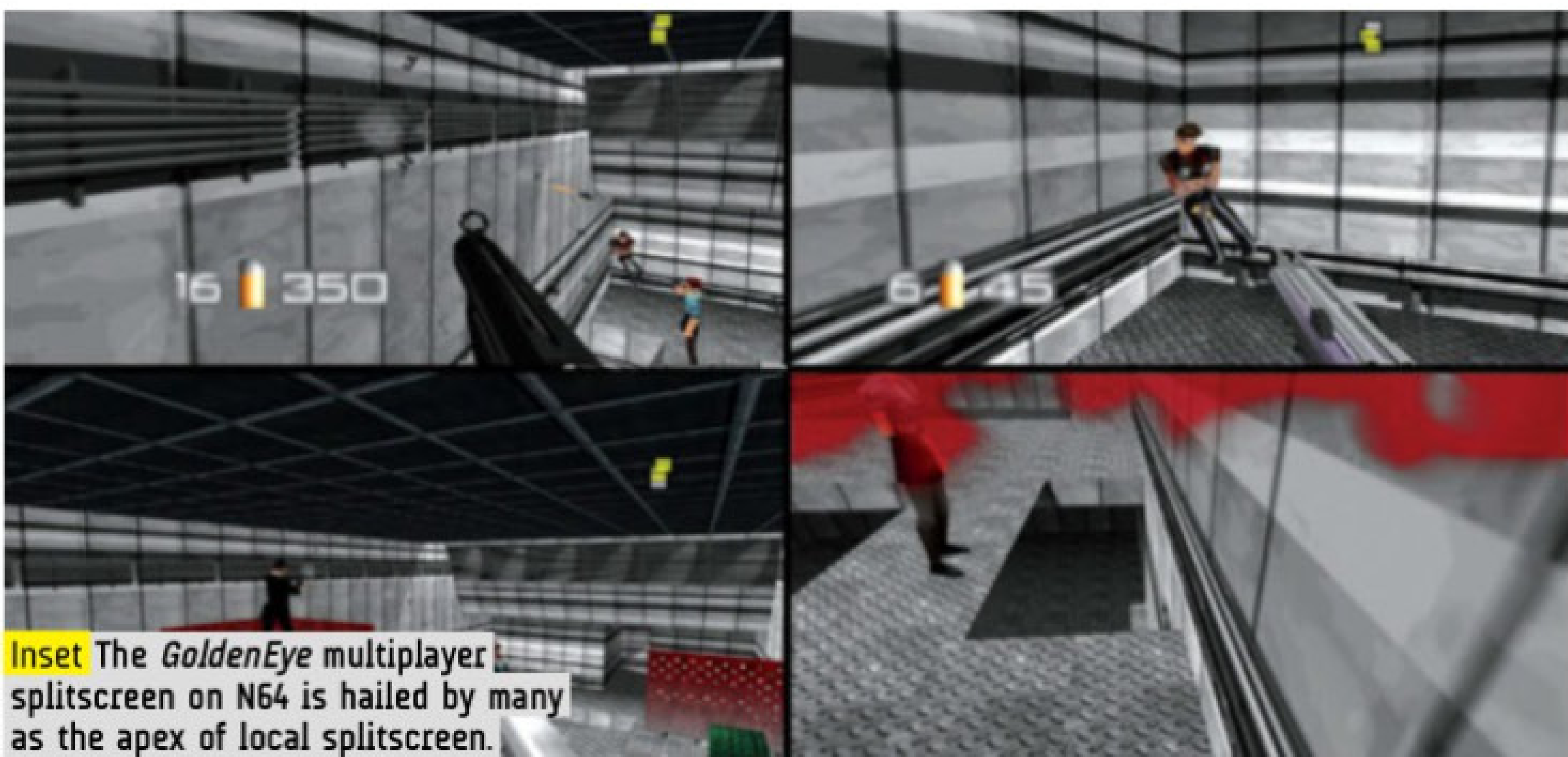
Inset Xbox 360 exclusive *Splinter Cell: Conviction* had a co-op campaign wholly separate from the single-player narrative.



FOR THE SECOND YEAR RUNNING, NINTENDO HAS DECIDED AGAINST HOSTING A LIVE MEDIA BRIEFING AT E3



Inset The PS4's recent *Towerfall: Ascension* was a pleasant throwback to retro PvP erratic madness, something we really want to see more of, going forward.



Inset The *GoldenEye* multiplayer splitscreen on N64 is hailed by many as the apex of local splitscreen.

> "We've seen a general decline in games featuring support for more than one pad"

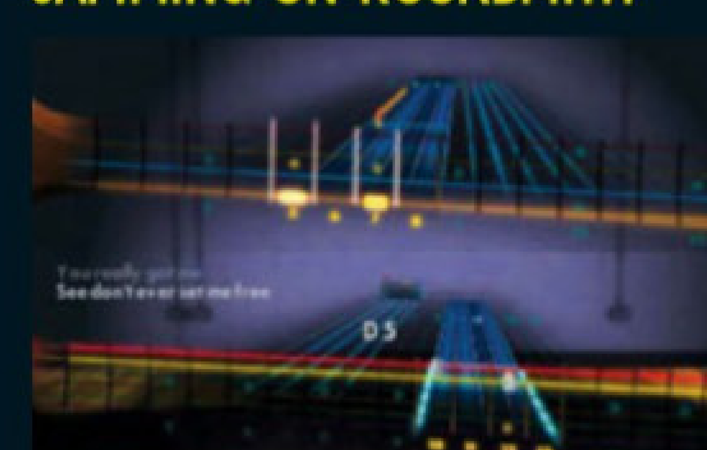
physical multiplayer alive: both *Mario Kart 8* and *Super Smash Brothers Brawl* are games that, really, rely on having a group of people gathered around one console or TV to extract the most fun from, and have been specifically designed for frenetic, multi-pad madness. Recent cult hit *Gang Beasts* proves there's still an audience for local multiplayer on the PC, too, and we're hoping to see a port of the weird, doughy-physics brawler announced for consoles any day now.

So what's the solution? Splitscreen was often lambasted for its clumsiness back in the day, and that was fair – lo-res textures, small screens and technological inhibitions made local play a more difficult and less enjoyable experience than it should have been. But now, with our huge flat-screen televisions, the ability to use a Vita or SmartGlass as a second screen and the advent of VR gaming (imagine one player, the monster in *Evolve*, for example, suited up in VR, pursuing three others who fight player one off with pads!) – it's safe to say local multiplayer has had the ground thoroughly prepared for its return. Whether or not developers and publishers will be willing to take the risk to accommodate an aspect of the gaming universe that's already been labelled 'out-dated', though, remains to be seen. We think that with the options opened up with new generation tech – Kinect, VR, second-screen capabilities – we'd be remiss as an industry to ignore the very thing that made gaming communities great in the first place.

WORKING TOGETHER

→ There are still a few titles that champion the idea of physically getting together with other people to play games…

JAMMING ON ROCKSMITH



Ubisoft's stellar *Rocksmith* is more of an educational tool than a game, granted, but the score attack modes and Guitarcade games lend themselves to competitive play quite well. Plug two real guitars into your system, and you can play lead and rhythm together – emulating that rock band that you've always secretly wanted to be.

SLAYING SPARTANS ON HALO 4



When 343 took over Halo duties from Bungie, we weren't sure if it would keep all the old online features the original studio included. Luckily, it did – even in the online modes on Xbox Live, a paying player can include up to three guest slots that unassigned controllers can tag onto, meaning that a party of four can play the online at once, off one console, with only one active Xbox Live Gold account.

BEATING UP YOUR FRIENDS IN GANG BEASTS



Gang Beasts is an odd game, still in its alpha stage, that sees up to four players at once engage in what is, simply, a bar brawl. Taking place across a variety of levels such as incinerators, Ferris wheels, window-washing gondolas and more to be added, you basically punch your opponents in the head until they pass out, before having the opportunity to grab them and throw them into deadly hazards.

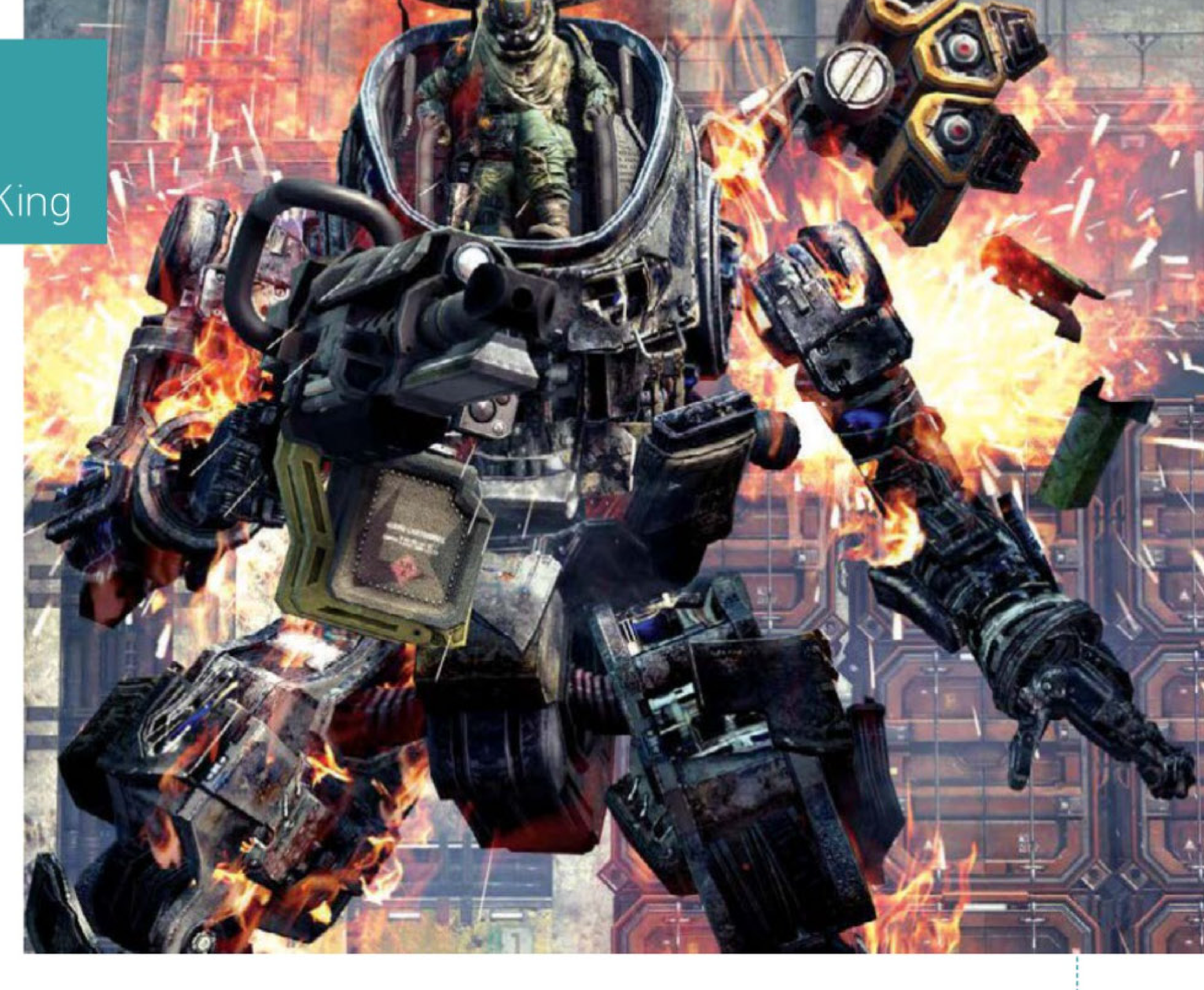
DECONSTRUCTING CONSTRUCTIONS IN LEGO MARVEL SUPER HEROES



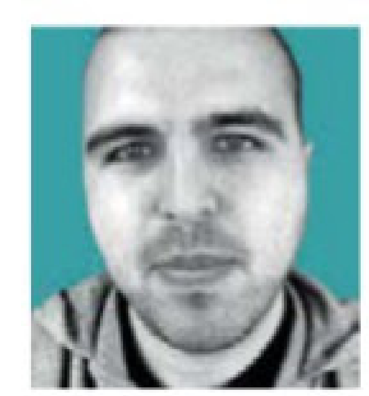
If you and a friend or loved one want to spend some time pretending you're a superhero (or villain), then *Lego Marvel Super Heroes* is probably the most legitimate experience you're going to get. The co-op is great fun, and will task you with solving puzzles together, taking down bosses together or simply just breaking apart the environment together. It's a shame the game doesn't support up to four players, but support for two players is good enough. For now.

→ BOB HOSKINS, KNOWN FOR PORTRAYING MARIO IN THE SUPER MARIO BROS MOVIE, DIES AGED 71

#TRENDING
with NowGamer.com's Ryan King



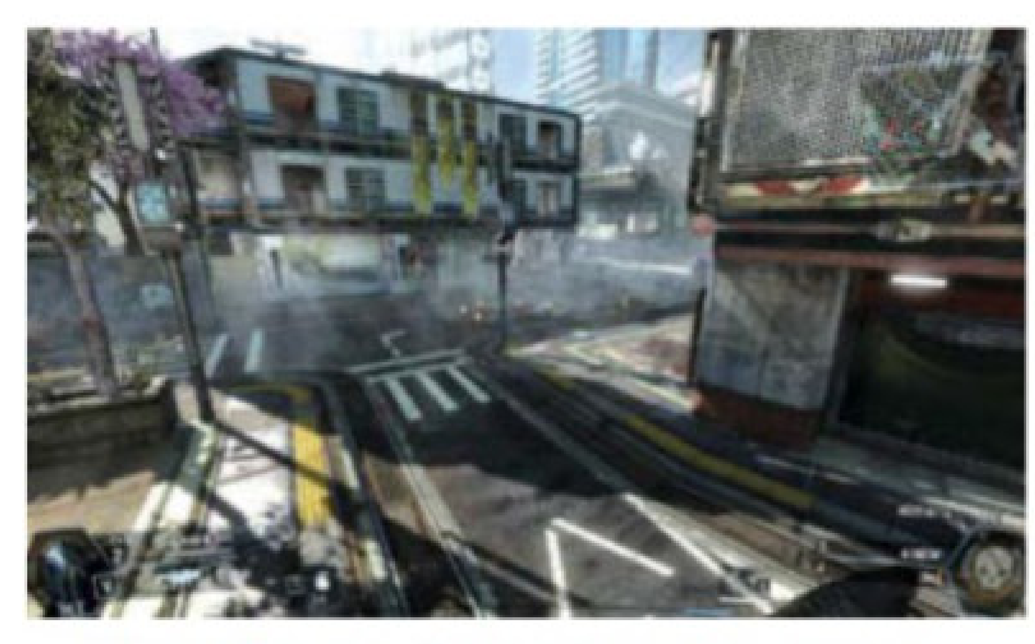
The Future Of FPS Games?



I have no idea what the story is in *Titanfall*. Not a clue. You could tell me that the story was about warring factions fighting over dinosaur DNA and if you said it with enough conviction, and maintained your poker face for long enough, I'd probably believe you.

I've completed the campaign mode from both sides, necessary to unlock the different types of Titan chassis, and I'm none the wiser as to what's going on. I know there's a character called Bish. There's also a robot thing who gives you orders. There's some sort of betrayal, whispering seems to be outlawed and you shoot people. But beyond that? I'm not sure what happens.

This is the problem when you mash up single-player craft with multiplayer mayhem – only one side can win out and it's often the demands and strains of multiplayer that rule the day. There are moments in *Titanfall* where the two sides sync up perfectly, such as watching a Titan smash through the enemy gates and your team pouring through the yawning gap like ants at the start of a match. But these moments only happen when everyone is running from the spawn point to the middle of the map, the only time player behaviour is predictable enough to craft some sort of spectacle around it. Once the gunfire breaks out and MLGSnipezU breaks off to chase mastachief69 down an alleyway, the illusion of a well-crafted story falls apart. Then *Titanfall* becomes another multiplayer shoot-'em-up where the game's characters and its players compete to see who can shout the loudest.



■ What's the story in *Titanfall*? Does anyone know? More importantly, does anyone care?

> There is clearly some potential for FPS shooters to do something daring, something new and something different. Something that is long overdue

It's hard to say what Respawn's intentions were with *Titanfall*'s story. It could be that Respawn genuinely believed that the blend of single-player drama and multiplayer chaos was the fresh cocktail that the stale FPS genre was screaming out for. It could also be that Respawn figured that having a few people shouting in the corner of the screen during multiplayer meant it could get away with not crafting a full setpiece extravaganza a la *Call Of Duty*, a clever way of keeping a lid on the eye-watering development budget for a start-up studio. Given Respawn had its community manager provide voice and mo-cap for one of *Titanfall*'s major characters, I'm leaning towards the latter.

Yet despite Respawn's failure to craft the dream single-player-meets-multiplayer hook-up, or at least ensure some fragments of plot were compelling enough to momentarily drag attention away from the multiplayer frenzy, I'm still really excited about what can happen with FPS multiplayer games in the future. We're seeing more developers tentatively prodding and poking at dynamic maps in shooters – *Gears Of War 2* took things to an extreme with Avalanche while *Call Of Duty: Ghosts* arguably didn't go far enough with its battlegrounds.

But slowly but surely the movement is happening. Combine that trend for dynamic maps with *Titanfall* taking the genre into unexplored territory and there is clearly some potential for FPS shooters to do something daring, something new and something different. Something that is *long* overdue. It's a shame that *Titanfall* wasn't quite the first game to achieve the perfect blend between single-player and multiplayer but at least there's a big game that's daring to push in the right direction. Will *Call Of Duty* follow? Will *Battlefield* finally ditch its feeble single-player efforts and try something ambitious with its multiplayer?

Fingers crossed that next-gen will see gaming's most prevalent genre continue to push boundaries and explore new territory. And maybe next time, we'll even know and care what the plot is about. Just not fighting over dinosaur DNA. We've already seen that story, obviously.

Ryan King is editor of NowGamer.com

Five Things About
The Crew

***The Crew* is a curious beast: operating within a scaled-down yet comprehensive reimagining of America, it's a racing game that fuses all the best parts of your typical RPG with the octane-heavy thrills of arcade racers like *Need For Speed.* We were lucky enough to spend some time breaking it down with developer Ivory Tower's COO, Ahmed Boukhelifa…**

1 It's based on real American locations….

"We selected actual places from the US and we made them to scale. Then we started to patch them up, and glue them together, so in the game you have actual chunks of America that come together; bits of the Grand Canyon, actual blocks of the Rocky mountains, real buildings like LAX. Our artists actually spent *years* fitting these places together, so that when you're driving around in the short-, medium- and long-range, everything has the right feeling."

2 It owes a lot to *Test Drive: Unlimited…*

"We thought of *Test Drive: Unlimited* as our prototype… The aim of the game was to see how credible it was to drive in an open world, online, with friends. So when we started *The Crew,* we had this prototype we worked on before, and we just wanted to do everything we did before, but *better.*"

3 Drivers don't just want to race…

"When we're making *The Crew,* we keep saying to ourselves that it's a game that's going to summarise 'all the adventures of driving'. We've got a very wide scope, and we want to give freedom to the player, and we can't compare ourselves to the competition because we're doing /everything/."

4 It's actually a solid RPG…

"We wanted to go deep into the depths of the RPG for this game; you've had tuning in driving games for ages, but it's usually so tucked away and complicated and inaccessible. We tried to find a way to show players the effects of customisation, and we wanted it to be based on realism. RPGs, for us, were therefore a very good model for us to look at."

5 *The Crew* is keen to share its secrets with you…

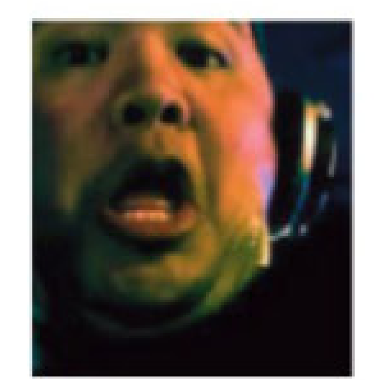
"You can always show animations and cinematics, they don't take a lot of processing power, but in *The Crew,* you can strip back your bonnet and the top layers of the engine and see exactly what's going on inside. This is all related directly to the physics model – something that could not have been done last generation because of the amount of CPU it takes up."

> "Our artists actually spent years fitting these places together, so that everything has the right feeling"
>
> Ivory Tower COO, Ahmed Boukhelifa

GAME DEV STORY
with Q-Games' James Mielke



The Shot Heard 'Round The Indie World



The last time we met I spoke about the second coming of BitSummit, aptly titled BitSummit MMXIV. The build-up to the event was an all-consuming time-crushing organisational apocalypse, but somehow we pulled it off. The results, if I can be clear, were pretty spectacular. The first BitSummit was a one-day event that catered to around 180 people in total, comprised of developers, volunteers, media, and sponsors, stuffed into a modest concert hall that felt jam-packed. The second BitSummit, by comparison, ran for three days (one media day, two public days) and hosted in total over 5,000 people in that span of time, including over 130 developers, up from 45 the year before. That's beyond exponential.

I will admit that despite a knockout first day – which saw Tetsuya Mizuguchi return to the spotlight as our keynote speaker, a special performance by *Mighty No. 9* composer Manami Matsumae, a DJ set by PixelJunk artist Baiyon, and a barnstorming performance by the UK's own Chipzel, along with a couple of surprise announcements, one by Comcept's Keiji Inafune – we totally blew the roof off on day two. I had no idea what to expect, really. I was hoping we would see a few dozen people, maybe? I was praying that we wouldn't hear crickets as we opened the doors, but at 10am when I arrived at the MiyakoMesse convention center to get the team ready, I was more than pleasantly surprised when I found myself walking past hundreds of gamers lined up to buy their tickets and join the festivities. By around lunchtime we had already had 800 people entering the show. Wow.

The buzz was tangible; Japan had never had an indie event quite like this before, and the developers let me know. They were glad to be able to talk to media, and fans, and the diverse array of sponsors from Kickstarter, Sony, Microsoft, Epic, and Unity (among others). They were doubly pleased to be able to do so in such a cool environment in an equally casual manner. I designed the event to have the ambience of a nightclub, so the monitors would pop and therefore the games.

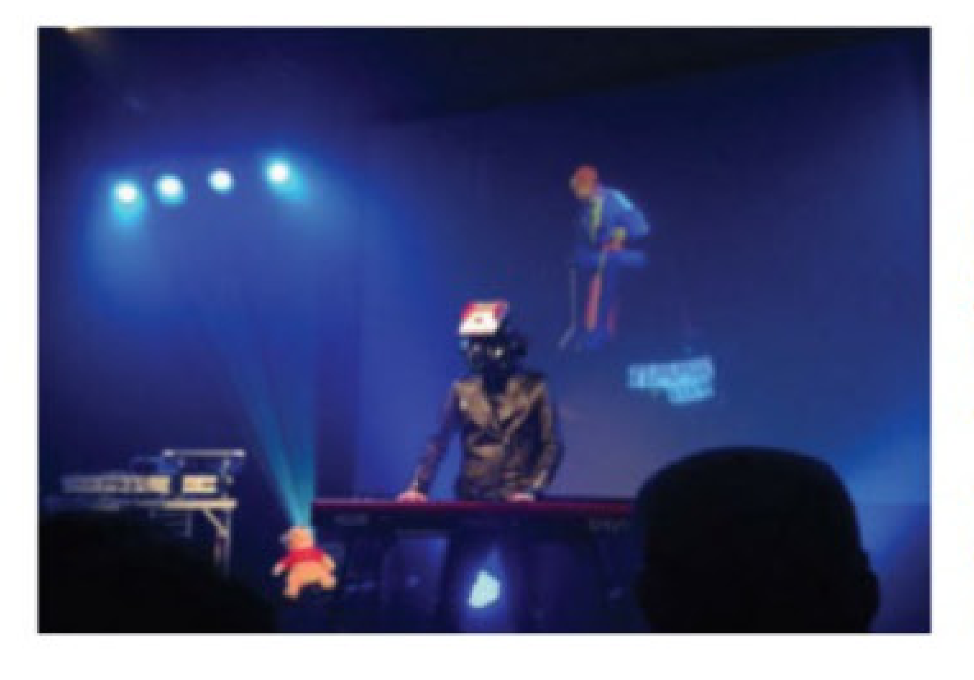
> The second BitSummit ran for three days and hosted over 5000 people

The second day featured performances by returning chiptune hero from the first BitSummit, Professor Sakamoto, as well as an incredible sunset show by *PaRappa the Rapper* creator Masaya Matsuura, who performed some of his most famous game music, as well as hits from his back catalogue as a pop star with his duo PSY-S (pronounced: saiz). Sandwiched inbetween was a roundtable featuring Yoshiro Kimura (*Little King's Story, Chulip*), Takumi Naramura (*La-Mulana 1* & *2*), and super-revered underground indie developer, ZUN (*Touhou Project*). The event was absolutely packed for this portion of BitSummit, which showed me just how much passion there is for these game makers in Japan. We also featured a special announcement from developer Dracue, who revealed a PS4 remake of the 2D shooter classic, *Assault Suit Leynos*. This was my favorite announcement. So with things firing on all cylinders, what could possibly go wrong?

On day three I lurched out of bed with the worst muscle cramp in my legs since my soccer-playing years in high school. Immediately after I succumbed to the worst case of food poisoning I've ever had, all within the space of ten minutes. Unfortunately I still had to get through day three of BitSummit, most of which I orchestrated lying face down on a meeting room floor trying desperately to pass out. Still, I managed to drag myself on stage to not only take part in a fighting game competition with the developer of the game *EF-12* (created by former Tekken developer, Masahiro Onoguchi) as well as host the day three BitSummit awards presentation. Never let it be said I don't give my all for the indie scene. Day three also featured some amazing performances by Saori Kobayashi who performed music from the *Panzer Dragoon* series, as well as Takayuki Nakamura of Brainstorm Inc., who played some of *Lumines*' best tracks along with a wild, anything goes band comprised of other industry veterans all jamming along.

It was a pretty amazing, exhausting, exhilarating experience, to see so much energy and Japanese culture filling the entire ground floor of this event space. I am still in shock that we could go from less than 200 people to over 5000 in the space of one year. The challenge now is how do we keep our compass headed in the right direction as we gear up for what I affectionately refer to as "B3." I can tell you we've already found a new location, and it looks like Macross City from the outside. With any luck and a whole lot of help we'll pull that one off too. Keep your eye on the Japanese indie scene and you'll be pleasantly surprised.

James Mielke is a producer at Q-Games



BITSUMMIT III

■ SO WHAT'S NEXT? DO we go bigger? Do we expand yet again? These are the questions everyone I spoke with in the media at MMXIV asked me. My answer was consistent to the end: The amount of space we had this year could definitely support more developers. I reckon we could fit 200 developer teams in the space we had this year and still be comfortable once the public rolls in, so it'd be good to keep things consistent. It's not the size that matters to us but the quality of the experience. The theme of the event will change, though, as will the visual direction. The only rule is to keep surprising people and ensure that they should expect the unexpected. If I can manage that then I'll have kept up my end of the bargain, and we'll be a year older and wiser.



Is the industry suffering from sequelitis?

→ This month saw the announcement of a new *Borderlands* game (which we've taken a detailed look at on page 24), and while we're excited about the new possibilities a new studio can explore within the *Borderlands* universe, it got us thinking: do we really need to rely so much on tried-and-tested IP in this industry to assure sales and makes sure things sell? Should that even be the end-game, when it comes to thinking about putting out a new title; shouldn't the industry be driven by creativity?

■ Publishers and developers have to [rely on old IP] – too many new IPs have failed, hence *Assassin's Creed IV* over a new pirate game.
@bignes1080, Twitter

■ Games do rely too much on safe IP, much like the movie industry. Having a low-budget scene is so important as it allows the kind of freedom that big-budget lacks.
@notproperwelsh, Twitter

■ Three games in, it's easy to forget that *Borderlands* was far from a 'safe' IP when it launched first, with its cel-shaded visuals and weird blend of shooting and looting. That said, I feel like developers churn out these sequels too frequently nowadays. One reason why series like *The Legend of Zelda* still stand strong after 25 years is because every instalment is well thought out and polished for at least a few years.
Joel Hartmann, Facebook

■ There are many titles coming out, or which have come out in the past few years, which take risks with new IP but the market is heavily peppered with existing franchises that overshadow the risk takers. Personally speaking, most of the games I've played this year are likely unknown to those triple-A hounds who can't see beyond the big-name studios... and all of those games have been original.
Mark Reid, Facebook

■ I think the reliance on bigger IP has become more necessary to ensure smaller projects get bankrolled with less risk, sadly this methodology isn't always practiced.
@nezzko, Twitter

■ This is a sign of the times. Games these days are insanely expensive to produce, and a single flop can end with the demise of a whole company. It's no wonder that developers stick to IPs that they know will sell, as they cannot afford to risk creating something that doesn't appeal.
Andy O'Flaherty, Facebook

■ There is a reliance on strong IP, but [the publishers responsible] are big businesses with big overheads. Something flops, lots of people lose their jobs... it's a big risk.
@starfox118, Twitter

■ It's weird now. The industry's responding to demand for new IPs, but it's desperate to canonise the successes as franchises.
@87th, Twitter



WHY I ❤...

Deus Ex

DAVID JAFFE, BARTLET JONES SUPERNATURAL DETECTIVE AGENCY

"I would say my pure favourite game of all time is probably Deus Ex*. I think it's just the most immersive videogame I've played and it's the only game I've played that really made me feel like the Holodeck could be possible. There are moments in that game where everything comes together and it feels like it's folding itself around your choices, like you're actually in that world. Even though there are better-looking and better-playing games today, that remains one of the few games that has done that for me in a way that made me feel genuinely transported – like, 'Holy shit, I could live in this world and never want to leave'. The second one I got very bored with very quickly – I played it long enough to know that I loved the storytelling and thought that was brilliant but the rest of it? I got bored and didn't finish it. And with* Human Revolution*, very early on I got to a point that I could not get past - I'm like 'What the fuck am I doing wrong?' and I haven't gone back to it. It didn't feel like the same game. I heard it was good but it didn't feel like I was playing a proper* Deus Ex*."*



"There are moments in that game where everything comes together and it feels like it's folding itself around your choices"

DAVID JAFFE, BARTLET JONES SUPERNATURAL DETECTIVE AGENCY

■ *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* is rife with new enemies to blow to bits, like this friendly guy here.

"Currently there are – between PS3 and Xbox 360 – over 150 million installed units worldwide. There are fewer Xbox Ones and PS4s than we have sold copies of Borderlands 2"

RANDY PITCHFORD, CEO AND PRESIDENT, GEARBOX SOFTWARE.







INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Origin: Australia
Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: 2K Australia, Gearbox Software
Release: Q3 2014
Genre: Loot-'em-up
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

2K Australia is responsible for developing *BioShock* and *BioShock 2*, along with Ken Levine's now defunct Irrational Games arm of 2K. The studio also worked on the tepidly received *The Bureau: XCOM Declassified* – this is its first release since, so hopefully *Borderlands* can get it back on the right track.

Developer History

BioShock
2007 [Multi]
BioShock 2
2010 [Multi]
The Bureau: XCOM Declassified
2013 [Multi]

High Point

The 2K Australia team worked on the bulk of *BioShock 2* – whilst the game didn't receive the raucous praise of its forebear and predecessor, it was still a phenomenal interactive experience.

Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel

CONCEPT ■ Set between *Borderlands* and *Borderlands 2*, *The Pre-Sequel!* will focus on villains introduced in both games, and their treacherous work under big bad Handsome Jack

Aim for the moon, land in the stars

Playing as the hero in *Borderlands* has always felt a little off-kilter. Okay, so you're tasked with hunting for mystical treasure, or saving Pandora, and we're sure you can use that motivation to justify some sort of utilitarian campaign about killing hundreds for the sake of thousands, but still… as a sort-of hero in the *Borderlands* universe, the amount of blood that ends up on your hands feels at odds with your other motivations. Wouldn't it make more sense to play as a pure villain? To play as a character that has little to no investment in the well-being of others? Sure it would, and that's why 2K Australia (overseen by Gearbox Software) is taking *Borderlands* to a darker side of the moon.

That's literal, by the way; the whole game is going to be set on Pandora's moon, during Handsome Jack's descent into utter villainy. You'll be playing as a selection of his biggest and baddest henchmen – all characters that you'll have met in the games to date. They're all working under Handsome Jack as the maniacal villain instigates his campaign to take over Hyperion's H-shaped moon base (after being exiled to a prison facility nearby) – this means you'll be seeing a lot of space-based combat, and this ties directly into what 2K Australia wanted to do with *The Pre-Sequel*: mess around with and update the pre-existing *Borderlands* engine.

You may have noticed this game won't be seeing a next-gen release (we reckon that'll be saved for the numerically canonical *Borderlands 3*…) – the primary reason for this is because 2K Australia thinks most *Borderlands* players are still on PS3/Xbox 360, and that they want to make improvements to the engine behind the game, rather than create with something new. We appreciate the philosophy there – the focus on updating the existing engine will see moon-based physics explored to full effect: *The Pre-Sequel* will include O_2 packs that you'll have to keep an eye on; these are required for breathing out in the cold frontiers of space and can be spent to unleash powerful jumps that can be turned into area-of-effect slams when you connect with the ground. Gun-fights on the moon also mean altered gravity, so expect *Halo* jumps galore as you lay waste to Pandora's only natural satellite.

/// This reliance on the oxygen will affect the game in a pretty big way – similarly to grenade and shield mods in the previous games, your O_2 kits can be upgraded with perks. Some let you add elemental properties to your ground-pounds, some let you create little pockets of atmosphere that revert gravity to normal/allow regular breathing, and some allow for greater jump bursts or stronger ground pounds. Elements will behave differently in different environs, too – in the cold outlands of space, the new cryogenic elemental property will be far more effective, whilst lasers and fire will only be truly effective when they've got oxygen to feed on. Enemies' O_2 tanks will also provide bonus critical hit spots – blow out their helmets or O_2 supply and you'll inflict pretty much instant death on humanoid foes (we assume Loaders will be immune to these exploits). All these extra facets of gameplay will have to be taken into account in order to take out the new varieties of enemies you'll encounter on the moon and its surrounding habitats – a strategic element of *Borderlands* that has always been there, but never fully capitalised on. Combining the new space-based approaches to cel-shaded manslaughter with the previously existing class-based co-op promises to invigorate the game with enough fresh content to make this inbetween-quel worth it.

Speaking of classes, *The Pre-Sequel* will see four new denominations of character introduced into Pandoran lore. The 'tank' character in *The Pre-Sequel* is Athena, the rogue assassin and ex-employee of the Atlas Corporation you'll have met if you invested in the original *Borderlands* DLC pack *The Secret Amory Of General Knoxx*. Athena, as "the Gladiator", has the ability to deploy a hefty shield that can soak up all damage, making her a great front-runner when moving into heavily occupied areas. This shield can be augmented in one skill tree to become a weapon in its



own right; hurling it at enemies inflicts up to double damage the shield soaked up, including elemental debuff effects, and skill points can be spent to widen the shield's area of effect, with the final unlockable perk on that tree granting ricochet properties to the shield that can make quick work of an area crawling with bad guys (well, good guys) in no time.

Remember Wilhelm – that cyborg badass everyone was terrified of – from early on in *Borderlands 2*? He makes a return as the game's "Enforcer". The more you upgrade Wilhelm, the closer to his *Borderlands 2* cyborg appearance he gets, and while it's still a little unclear how far down the cyborg path you'll travel or what specific perks the upgrades will grant, it's been confirmed that by the time you're maxed out, you'll be playing as the full-on cyborg boss you encountered at the start of *Borderlands 2*. Nisha – the sheriff of Lynchwood, again from *Borderlands 2* – will be playable as the "Lawbringer" class. While details on her remain scant, we know from her backstory that she's been romantically involved with Jack, and that her weapon drops boosted melee and allowed health recovery via melee attacks: it's reasonable to assume she'll operate similarly to Zer0 or Brick.

"We're still arguing inside of Gearbox about how much of our own time we should spend on the Borderlands space versus on future things"

RANDY PITCHFORD, CEO AND PRESIDENT, GEARBOX SOFTWARE

The final character that comes as standard in *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel* is none other than the unmistakable Claptrap. And it's /the/ Claptrap, too, everyone's favourite wub-wubbing hyperactive robot from *Borderlands 2*. His class is defined as the "Fragtrap", and since the game is set in the five years between the two released *Borderlands* games, you *will* be seeing other Claptraps that haven't yet been decommissioned. Since none of the other characters seem to fill the mantle of 'demolitions expert' this time around, expect Claptrap to be spewing rockets aplenty in between his awful jokes and screeching monologues. His point of view is much lower than the other characters, too, and he seems more mobile – think of him as the Oddjob of the *Borderlands* universe.

It's clear that 2K Australia is keen on taking all the expected conventions that *Borderlands* has established and running with them itself. From the gameplay we've seen, it's already clear that the Australian team is bringing its own flavour of comedy to the game – the inhabitants of the moon all speak in Aussie accents, the *Mad Max* influence is even more pronounced and there's even a mission about cricket. Blimey. Gearbox also leant Anthony Burch – *Borderlands 2*'s lead writer – to facilitate the in-house writing team at 2K Australia, meaning that the whole tone of the thing isn't going to be too far removed from what die-hard Pandora lovers are used to. It also allows *The Pre-Sequel* to backtrack and address narrative elements that have been touched upon previously, but never explored in too much depth. Handsome Jack was one of the best parts of *Borderlands 2*, and we welcome a deeper look into his insane psyche.

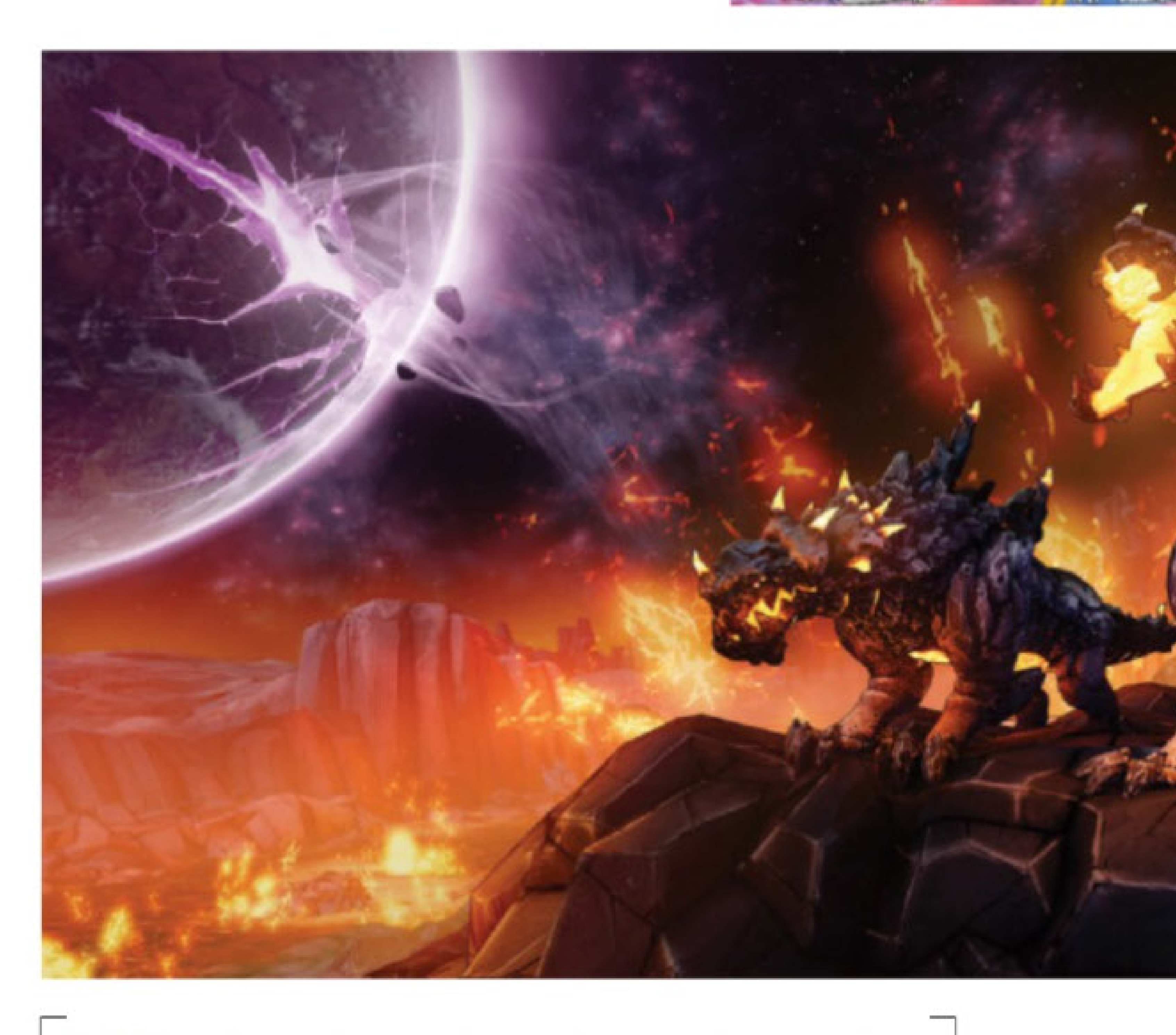
/// The sci-fi setting of the moon moves away from the dusty confines of Pandora's surface, too, allowing more experimentation with gameplay mechanics, environments and narrative themes. There's an ice elemental attribute in *The Pre-Sequel*, for example – something that wasn't in the previous games because of its contrast against the other elements (fire, acid, slag etc). In space, it seemed more logical – more in-tune with what you'd expect to find littered around space stations and lunar outposts. This is another facet of strategy that will be opened up to players – we prefer playing as snipers in *Borderlands*, allowing our teammates to go in and slag our enemies while we chip away with headshots. Cryogenic attacks will let players suppress enemies that might pose a bigger threat than others – imagine if you could've frozen Badass Goliaths in their tracks back in *Borderlands 2*; it would have made some encounters far easier to, well, live through.

Randy Pitchford and the team at Gearbox have stated that they hope working on *The Pre-Sequel* will give 2K Australia the chance to breakout into a triple-A studio in its own right (something that Gearbox did itself after working on an existing property with *Half-Life: Opposing Force*). After the middling critical reception to 2K Australia's other projects, we hope working within a franchise as open to unique creativity and ingenuity as *Borderlands* will show the world just what the studio can achieve. The distance of the moon seems more than just physical here – it's almost metaphorical. 2K's project is in orbit around Gearbox's behemoth franchise, but whether or not the new title is going to have enough weight to alter the tides of the franchise as a whole remains to be seen.





Above: Jetpack bandits and raiders promise to add a level of verticality to what has always been a traditionally horizontal game – whether or not this will be reflected in the level design too remains to be seen. Right: The switch from always seeing the moon base and the moon itself above you to seeing Pandora… it should allow for some stunning setpieces.

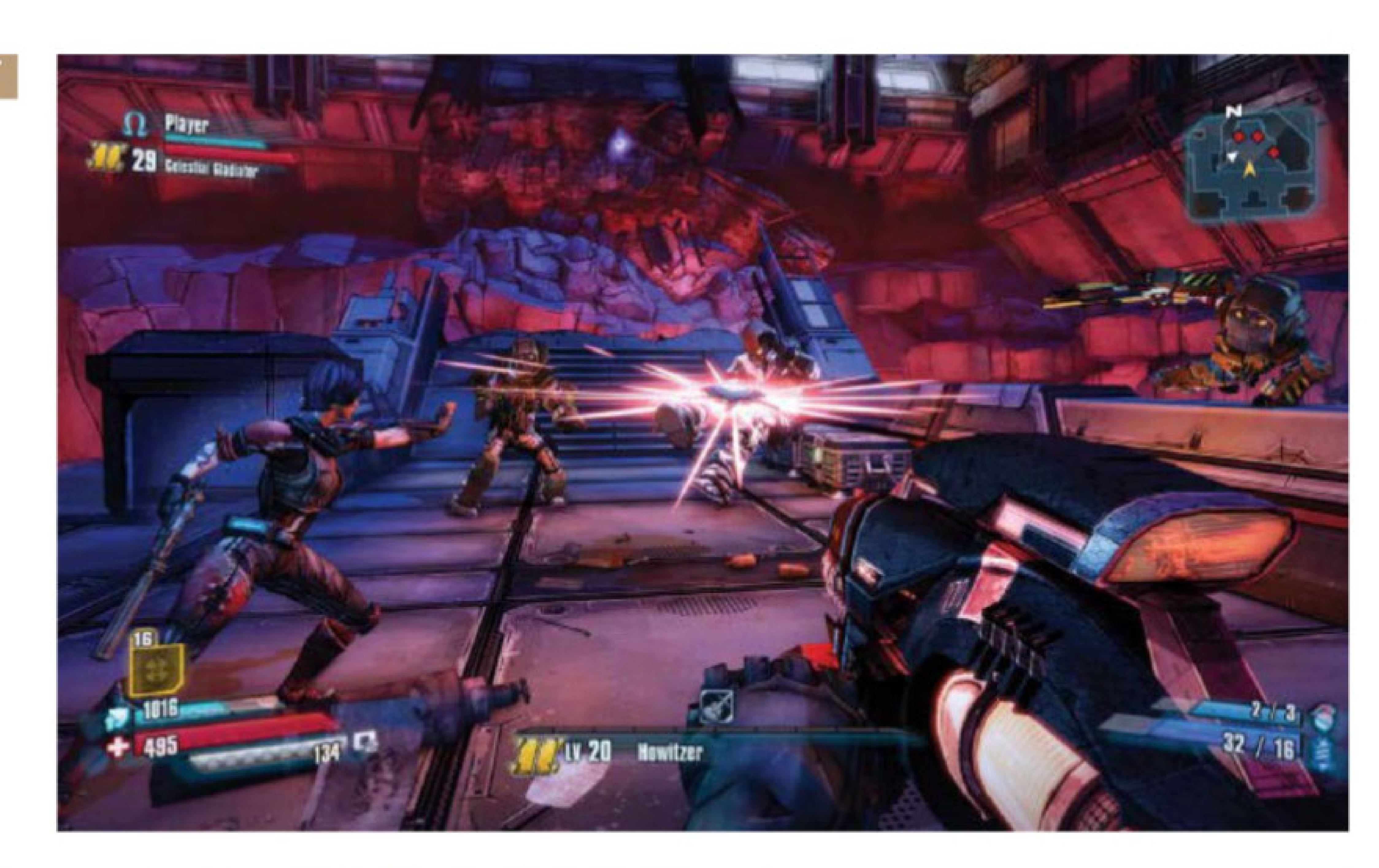


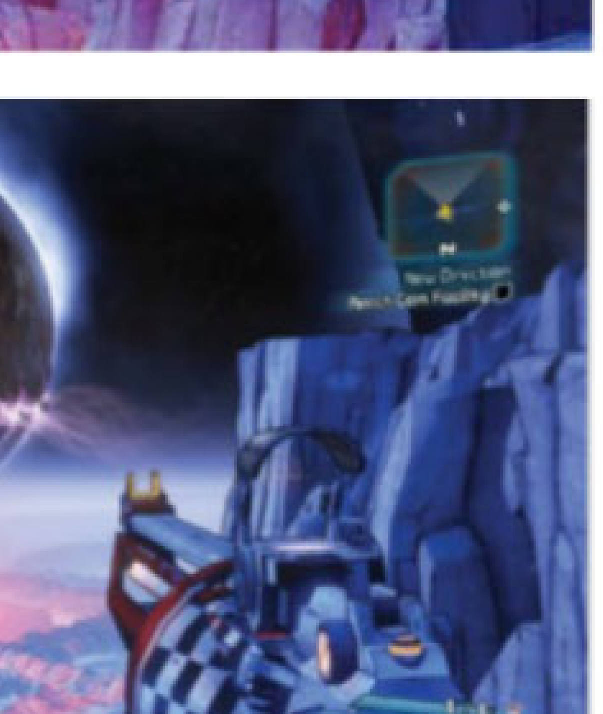
Above: Just because it's set on the moon, don't expect *The Pre-Sequel* to be all lunar-blue: 2K Australia have promised a varied series of environments.



THE WRITE TO REMAIN SILENT

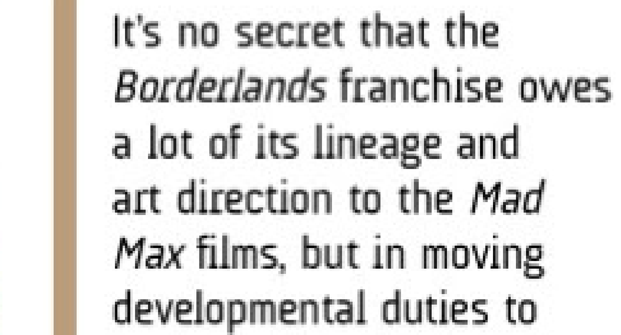
According to 2K Australia, playable characters have been given more in-game dialogue than their predecessors, apparently hoping this will create a better platform for storytelling. We look forward to seeing how this materialises, and if it'll give *Borderlands* a more engaging narrative experience than it has had before, not to say that we didn't enjoy the main story, but the NPCs could get repetitive. Thing is, we enjoyed Claptrap when he was a passive character we could just walk away from – if we're playing as him, and he has *more* lines of dialogue than before… we're not sure we can handle that. After the 1000th iteration of his dubstep beatbox, we think we'd be about ready to turn one of the 87 bazillion guns in the game on ourselves.







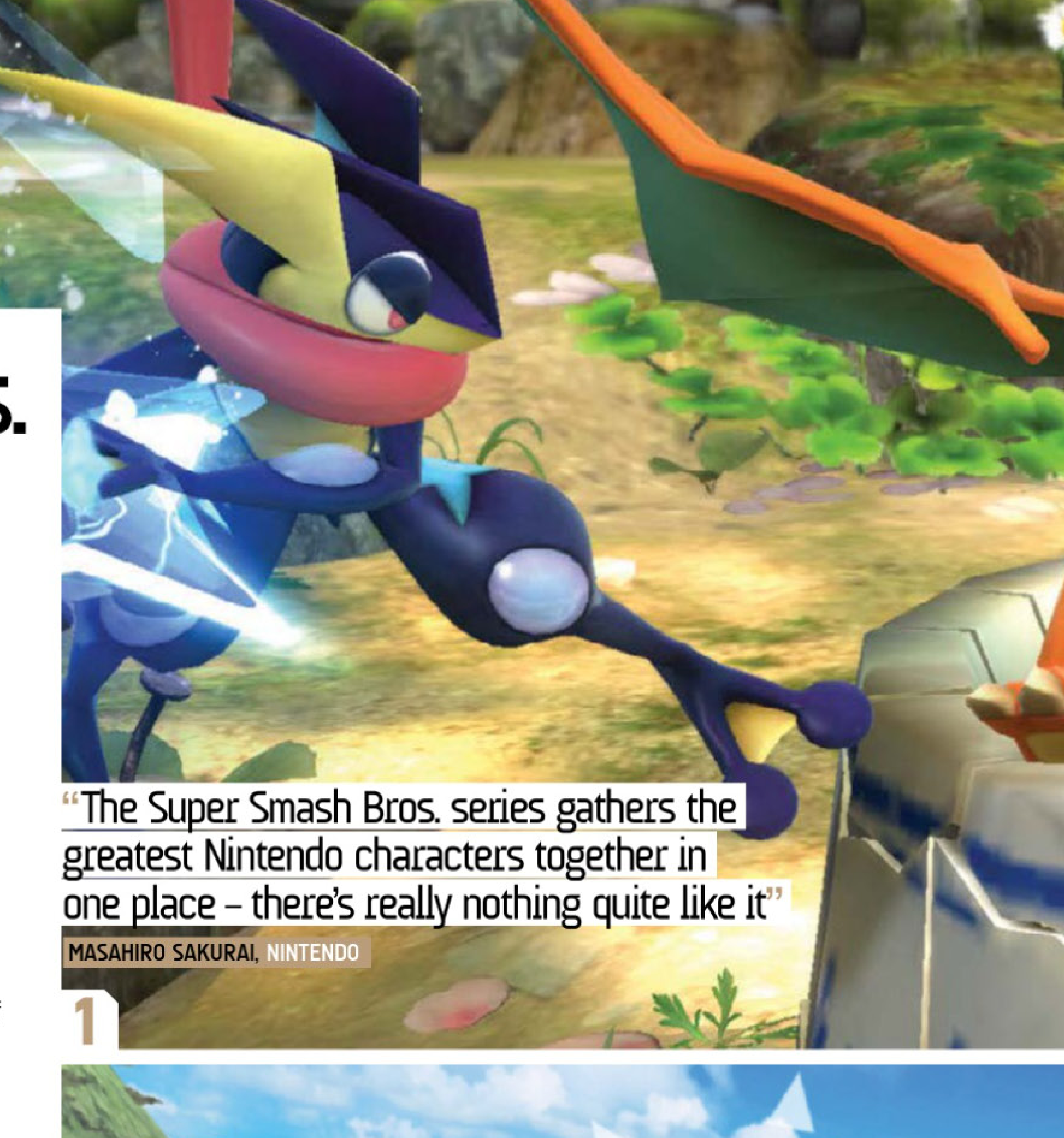
Left: *Borderlands* veterans will recognise the skill trees have retained their exact same form – much like the vast majority of the UI. Below: The new cryogenic element promises to add new depth to the solid combat mechanics *Borderlands* has always revolved around





MAD MAXED OUT

It's no secret that the *Borderlands* franchise owes a lot of its lineage and art direction to the *Mad Max* films, but in moving developmental duties to an Australian studio, we're surely about to see these references and influences for more pronounced. For example, Bruce Spence, the actor known for his portrayal of the Gyro Captain in *Mad Max 2*, will make an appearance in-game… as a gyrocopter pilot. We're almost certain this won't be the last reference to the film we'll see in the game – let alone to wider Australian culture. We hope it extends beyond lazy stereotypes though, the sarcastic, satirical nature of *Borderlands* is better than that.



Super Smash Bros.

CONCEPT ■ Nintendo's most famous icons (and a few others) return to pummel the crap out of each other in a (not-PlayStation) all-star battle royale.

The gloves are off

INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS, Wii U
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Bandai Namco, Nintendo
Release: Summer 2014 (3DS), Winter 2014 (Wii U)
Genre: Beat-'Em-Up
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Bandai Namco (as it has recently rebranded itself) has a sterling legacy in the fighting genre, with *Tekken* and *SoulCalibur* among its various beat-'em-up franchises. It has even collaborated with Nintendo in the past, specifically on the *Mario Kart* arcade titles (naturally featuring a cameo from *Pac-Man*).

Developer History

Tekken Revolution
2013 [PS3]
Project X Zone
2012 [3DS]
Soulcalibur V
2012 [Multi]
Mario Kart Arcade GP 2
2007 [Arcade]

High Point

Of its recent output, *Project X Zone* was an ambitious (albeit flawed) attempt to combine notable gaming icons in one massive brawler.

There are few surprises when it comes to the latest update on *Super Smash Bros.*, only logic. Working out of Bandai Namco's Japan headquarters, director Masahiro Sakurai has given the most comprehensive update on the dual-format sequel to date, unveiling specifics on characters (such as customisable movesets when playing offline), technical details (60fps on 3DS) and news systems (enforcing an online code of conduct) that'll herald the evolution of one of Nintendo's premium *Mario* spin-offs.

Of course, the most important information was a release date, and in a surprise move we'll be getting the 3DS iteration this summer, a few months before the Wii U version hits consoles in time for Christmas. It's a smart decision to promote the handheld edition (the least desirable of the two) before the Wii U sequel arrives, however Sakurai has stated that both versions will share the same character roster – will there be any surprises left for *Smash Bros.* on Wii U? We suspect Sakurai and his team have a few tricks left up their sleeve, and we have every reason to believe that this could be the best *Smash Bros.* yet.

1 NEW CHARACTERS

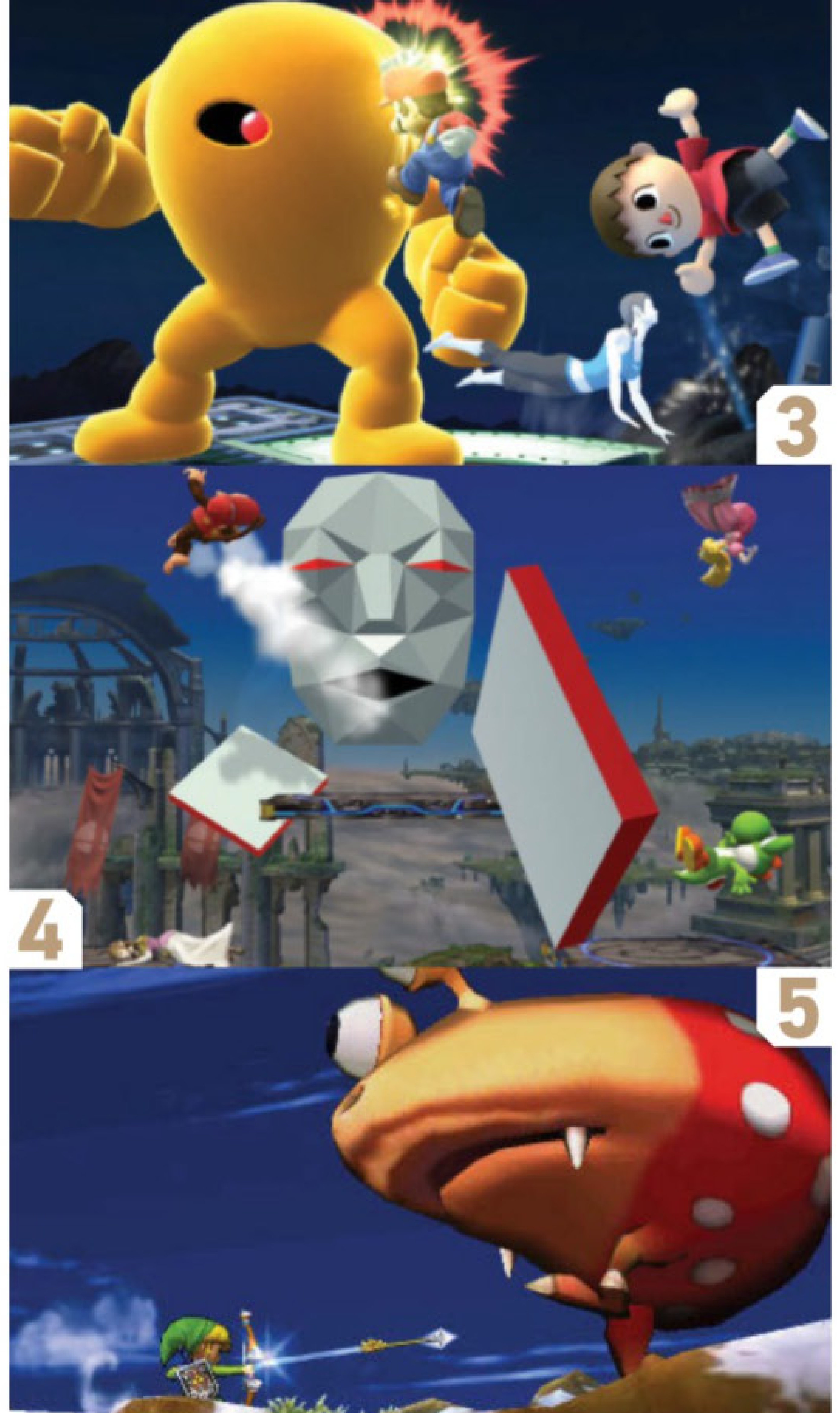
Sakurai keeps the *Smash Bros.* Miiverse feed busy and has been steadily expanding its roster of playable characters. The big news is that transformations (a feature introduced in *Brawl*) have been dropped, meaning that Zero Suit Samus and Sheik are now their own playable characters. Charizard appears independent of the Pokémon trainer, and newcomer Greninja – the fully evolved form of Froakie from *X* and *Y* – continues the series' tradition of introducing a new Pokémon from the franchise's most recent entry.

> "The Super Smash Bros. series gathers the greatest Nintendo characters together in one place – there's really nothing quite like it"
> MASAHIRO SAKURAI, NINTENDO

1







2 (OLD) NEW WORLDS

Alongside the announcement of new characters, we've been given a glimpse of some of the stages unique to each platform. *3D Land*, *StreetPass Quest* and *Spirit Train* stand out as the highlights on those revealed for 3DS, while *Mario Galaxy Skyloft* and *Pilotwings* do much to impress on Wii U. There's also confirmation that there will be a revival of classic stages from previous *Smash Bros.* games, again unique to each platform. Additionally, most stages will also have a *Final Destination* form, for straight-up competitive bouts.

3 ENTER THE BOSS

One of the novel new additions is the presence of bosses on a selection of the stages. The example we're shown is Yellow Devil, a Mega Man villain that appears during the Wily Castle stage. This Goliath will attack players and can be destroyed, and doing so will unleash an explosion that will damage other players caught in its radius. While no other boss has been confirmed, the footage hinted at infamous *Metroid* enemy Ridley making an appearance – who is surely overdue for its own slot on the character roster.

4 SMASHING ONLINE

The online features in Wii's *Brawl* were malnourished and overcomplicated. *Smash Bros.* on both 3DS and Wii U intends to simplify the system, introducing two modes: For Fun and For Glory. The former puts players against each other with all the items and stages randomly generated. For Glory is a more hardcore mode, with no items, one-on-one battles available and will feature only Final Destination as a stage. The ranking system has also been overhauled, with a stat dictating your standing among the community.

5 SMASH RUN

In a new mode exclusive to the 3DS, four players must race through a gauntlet, fighting enemies from a range of Nintendo titles (crocs from *Donkey Kong*, bulbobs from *Pikmin* and magikoopas from *Mario* to name a few) in order to collect power-ups. The rules are similar to those in City Trial in *Kirby's Air Ride*, the difference being that after the time limit is up, players are thrown into the arena to battle it out using the power-ups they have acquired. It's an interesting mode that should make for a nice accompaniment to the yet-to-be-revealed single-player campaign.

1 IT'S FAIR to say that the protagonist, Detective Sebastian Castellanos, will be an unbalanced individual caught up in the horrific madness that unfolds in his town. Sebastian's imagination, or the manifestation of his inner demons?

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Bethesda Softworks
Developer: Tango Gameworks
Release: 29 August
Genre: Survival-Horror
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Although best known for his anthology of seminal horror titles, Mikami has had a successful and diverse career outside of the genre that made his name. After a string of licensed titles (including the superb *Aladdin* on SNES), he moved into horror and, eventually, created *Resident Evil*. Since then he has worked on *Devil May Cry, Dino Crisis, God Hand* and *Vanquish*.

Developer History

Vanquish
2010 [Multi]
Resident Evil 4
2005 [Multi]
Dino Crisis
1999 [Multi]
Resident Evil
1996 [Multi]

High Point

It's a coin toss between *Resident Evil* and *Resident Evil 4*, but the fact that Mikami managed to establish so many genre tropes in his debut as a director, the former clinches it.

The Evil Within

CONCEPT ■ Shinji Mikami's return to the survival-horror genre, places players into a nightmarish labyrinth in which everything is trying to kill you

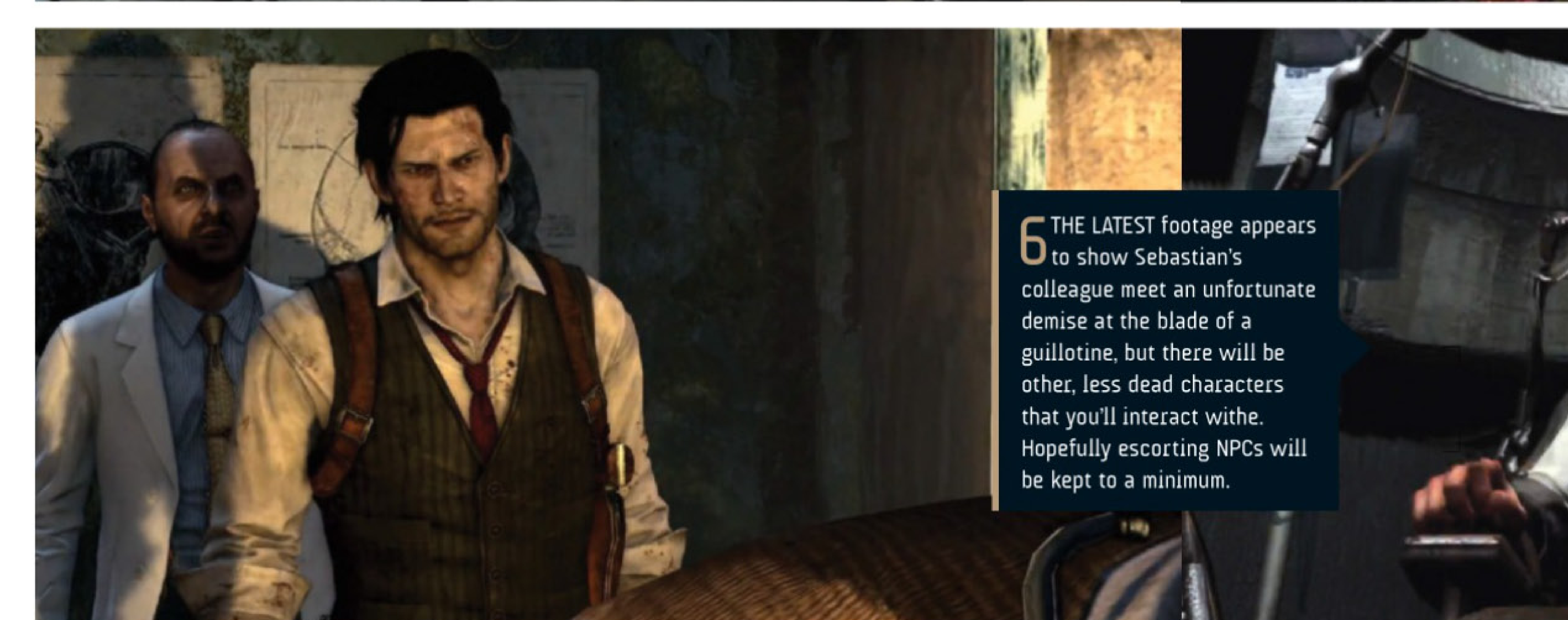
Are you afraid of the dark?

There's a risk that Shinji Mikami's long-awaited return to the survival horror genre may be overshadowed by the work of those inspired by his enduring legacy. With Creative Assembly's *Alien: Isolation* promoting a disquieting atmosphere above the series' histrionic-laden staples and inspired indie offerings – such as the claustrophobic *Routine* – discovering innovation in their limitations, *The Evil Within* could be viewed as dragging an old corpse back out on parade. Yet, while Mikami certainly has an eye on replicating not only his own past works – the over-the-shoulder camerawork and sprawling setting of *Resident Evil 4* spring to mind – but that of other luminous genre masterpieces – it's hard to ignore the pervading sense of dread more common among the fog in *Silent Hill*. But it's what's new that shines brightest amongst the darkened corridors of the insane asylum, from the contorted creature design that haunt the game's hero to the genuinely disturbing barrage of imagery, it suggests a much more mature approach to both story and design than Mikami's previous efforts.





4 THERE WILL be monsters. Lots of them. Mikami has always held a penchant for a 'less is more' approach, but in *The Evil Within* he's clearly letting his creative juices flow. There appears to be several contorted creatures here that could rival the *Souls* series.



6 THE LATEST footage appears to show Sebastian's colleague meet an unfortunate demise at the blade of a guillotine, but there will be other, less dead characters that you'll interact withe. Hopefully escorting NPCs will be kept to a minimum.



2 THERE'S GOING to be a lot of trippy imagery in *The Evil Within*. In what appears to be a dream sequence/hallucination, Sebastian wanders through a field of sunflowers towards an ominous-looking shack. Expect to be pulled out of reality on several occasions.

3 IT'S CLEAR that the world itself will have a strong character. Whether in the asylum or in any of the other locations, this horrific place is actively working against the player, shifting and evolving itself to fight back in ever-more inventive ways.

5 WHILE THE game uses mechanics Mikami established in the *Resident Evil* series (note the over-the-shoulder aiming), there's more emphasis on stealth and using the environment. This won't just be a case of shooting your way to salvation.

7 IF THIS is Mikami's swansong to the genre he helped pioneer, then it's an ambitious one. Survival-horror may have been kept alive by indies, but *The Evil Within* has the chilling conceit and triple-A production values to put the genre back on top.

Dragon Age: Inquisition

CONCEPT ■ BioWare's fantasy epic sees you return to a true open world, replete with dragons, romance options, great writing and everything else that makes BioWare's RPGs great.

Fade to black

BioWare always seems ahead of the curve when it comes to RPGs. Last generation the studio provided the definitive sci-fi role-playing experience to the console hardcore and this generation, the studio looks set to get things off to a good start by actively remedying everything fans disliked about the second entry in their more traditional, fantasy-based IP – *Dragon Age*.

The EA-lead studio also seems to have an awareness of the wider videogames industry that's refreshing and forward-thinking – evidenced by their recent decision to release gender-neutral box art. The hero stands front and centre, back to the viewer, channelling the power of a variety of the game's resident beasts – BioWare had the explicit intention to keep the protagonist vague. This is a throwback to what RPGs with customisable leads were born to do: feature main characters that are nothing more than avatars for the gamer to project themselves onto. BioWare has the angle that this should be achievable whether you're male or female – immersion is a universal objective, and by focusing on making the protagonist a blank canvas, you can paint yourself upon your avatar with no borders to reign you in.

We're excited for *Dragon Age: Inquisition* – the *Dragon Age* series has always been defined by its supporting cast and, while we hope to see that trend continue, we also hope *Inquisition* offers a leading character more like *Mass Effect*'s Shepard than anything else. Shepard was distinguished enough to be an effective leader, yet the Spectre's morality remained utterly in your hands, allowing the game to craft a compelling power fantasy with Shepard at the crux. The world of *Inquisition* seems built to accommodate a similar model – we just hope that character-driven philosophy is recognised in-game.

MAGES VS TEMPLARS

■ THE GAME will feature far more geographical content than its predecessors – it's set in the realm of Thedas, which incorporates the familiar settings of Orlais and Ferelden under its kingdom. The realm is plagued with unrest, though, and the Inquisitor will play a vital role in mitigating damage (or encouraging chaos) in a war between the Templars and the Mages.



ENVIRONMENTAL INSTITUTION

ANY OPEN world game is defined by its world – that's a given. Luckily for us, BioWare has had decades of experience crafting sci-fi and fantasy realms that remain timeless and unique, even as technology races onwards. *Inquisition* looks like it'll push the beautiful Frostbite 3 engine to its limits, too, meaning we will be seeing the best-looking open world RPG yet (in theory).

EVERYBODY SUSPECTS THE INQUISITION

NO MATTER which race you decide to play as – and for a first in the series, there's actually quite a lot of choice – you'll be playing the part of an Inquisitor, a member of an enigmatic sect, who is investigating a tear in the Veil – a rift which is allowing the spectral realm of the Fade to corrupt reality.

HERE BE DRAGONS

AS THE title suggests, there will be a slew of dragons in the game – all of which need slaying. Heroically. But dragons aren't the only beasts you'll have to concern yourself with: the world of Thedas is teeming with unearthly creatures that, obviously, are baying for your blood. This firey rock thing doesn't look all too happy you're in his lair...

INFORMATION

Details

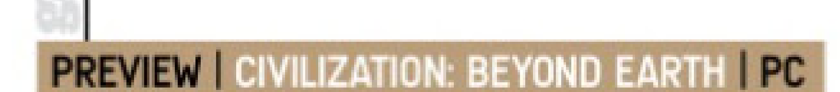
Format: Multi
Origin: Canada
Publisher: EA
Developer: BioWare
Release: 7 October
Genre: Fantasy RPG
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Founded by doctors with knowledge complementary to the games they'd go on to make, BioWare has become a name set in stone within the RPG genre. Everything BioWare does adheres to a watertight formula, yet each release sees enough innovation to keep the studio relevant, and often steps way ahead of the competition.

High Point

Mass Effect 2 was the highlight of last generation's RPGs for us – it was the perfect combination of epic, intimate, well-written, delicately paced and satisfying: a finished project amid a shining trilogy.







■ Above: Like *Civ V*, *Beyond Earth* is hex-based. Its higher technology allows for far more territorial control, though. Right: Alien species will be the same, but the style of planet determines how much of a threat/opportunity they are.



Civilization: Beyond Earth

CONCEPT ■ Where *Civilization* ends, *Beyond Earth* begins. Except for the Alpha Centauri part, because EA owns that. And with a rather less enlightened goal too.

From the beginning of history to a whole new start for humanity...

Ever since the first *Civilization*, the big goal has been the same – to leave Earth and found a colony on Alpha Centauri. In 1998, we got to take the next step in one of the greatest strategy games ever made – a masterpiece of SF and conquest whose shadow is going to loom over *Civilization: Beyond Earth* whatever happens. It is not *Alpha Centauri II*. For starters, complex rights ownership issues mean it can't be. It is however the game with the best shot at being its successor in a decade and a half.

Beyond Earth picks up in the aftermath of "The Great Mistake" – a nebulous series of disasters that lead to expeditions pledged to the various crumbling nations of Earth leaving home to start afresh on a new world. And then, shockingly, decide that it's not big enough for all of them. Some things never change, and that includes at least a few details that any *Civ* player will instantly recognise. You build Wonders. Develop cities. Make friends/enemies with other faction leaders. The *Civilization* name is in the title for a reason. Two, if you include marketing.

It's far from simply a futuristic skin though, with *Beyond Earth* enjoying a fresh start as much as the characters. The action actually starts on Earth before the expedition, with you as leader getting to plan for the trip and pack what you want to take off-world, allowing for an extra level of customisation before so much as arriving. Once there, the planet is going to be different every time – a faction in its own right, with its biomes and lifeforms needing to be tamed as well as discovered. Earth allegiance then quickly gives way to *Beyond Earth*'s competing 'affinities' – which factions can share, but lead to mutually exclusive goals. Harmony players are in tune with the planet, desperate to avoid making the same mistakes and being rewarded with the ability to tame its creatures and spread far and wide. Supremacy players are those seeking to use technology to master both

> "We've always let our fans create the history of mankind, and Civilization: Beyond Earth will now let them create the future"
>
> SID MEIER FIRAXIS

REMEMBERING ALPHA CENTAURI

ALPHA CENTAURI WAS a true pioneer in many ways. It introduced a living planet that fought back against its settlers with an ecosystem of mind worms and toxic fungus, as well as human leaders with distinct personalities that came across in their play style. It was also a fine bit of SF in its own right, telling a story of a truly alien place in a way that seemed optimistic on the surface, but actually told a breathlessly cynical story of optimism drowning under petty differences to the point that technology with names like 'nerve stapling' soon enough becomes standard issue, and only the deployment of 'planet busters' really raises anyone's ire. It's a slow game these days, but a great one.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC/Mac
Origin: US
Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: Firaxis
Release: Q3 2014
Genre: Strategy
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

Founded by strategy gods Sid Meier and Brian Reynolds and co-designer Jeff Briggs, Firaxis took the ability to make games with the name "Sid Meier's" and ran with it, producing everything from *Sid Meier's Gettysberg* to *Sid Meier's SimGolf*, whether or not Meier actually had much to do with them.

Developer History

X-COM: Enemy Unknown **2012 [PS3, 360, PC]**
Sid Meier's Civilization V **2010 [PC]**
Sid Meier's Pirates **2004 [PC, Xbox, iOS]**
Sid Meir's Alpha Centauri **1999 [PC, Mac]**

High Point

A powerhouse revival of the original *UFO, XCOM: Enemy Unknown* that both surprised critics and made saving Earth from alien invasions cool again.

the planet and the future. Finally, Purity players combine a nostalgia for Earth and their history with enough heavy firepower to hold back the 'alien' part of 'alien world'.

/// None are intended to be representative of play styles, but rather malleable ways to handle every kind of player. Harmony players could be pacifists, but just as easily turn nasty by summoning *Dune*-style worms against enemies, for example. Each does however have specific endgame goals – becoming one with the planet (Harmony, much like *Alpha Centauri*'s Transcendence ending), making Earth a subject to the new world (Supremacy) and being able to found a new human colony (Purity).

Each faction of course starts off with rather more tech to play with than a *Civilization* settler, with terraforming and an orbital layer on the map both taken for granted. Rather than a linear tech tree though, *Beyond Earth* focuses on a web arrangement – a huge shift that allows each side to focus on specific technologies like genetics and artificial intelligence, or spread research wider to unlock a bigger bag of potential tricks. Each side can also customise units to some extent, kitting them out with specific perks, with higher-tier ones separated by philosophical affinity and so distinct looks as well as capabilities. A Supremacy soldier for instance will be a shiny, sleek symbol of technology. Purity, a guy with a really big gun.

While the specifics may disappoint some hoping for an *Alpha* sequel, it's probably for the best overall that *Beyond Earth* is charting new ground. It's a game with a similar destination but a very different approach; like its premise, far more focused on taking *Civilization* as we know it to space and then seeing what happens next than starting completely fresh. We'll see if it's a journey worth embarking on this year.

Below: One encouraging new feature is that each planet is randomly generated to be more varied in its design than *Alpha Centauri*, which didn't do much outside of just altering with the map a little bit. However, we've yet to get word on whether they'll all have space-acne, though.





Above: There's definitely been an investment in presenting *Beyond Earth* with a more cinematic prospect. We've so far seen environments familiar to the series as well as the new futuristic landscape that players will sculpt. We're excited to see the variety of visuals that will be present across new worlds.

Below: While Optimus Prime and some of the other more notable members of the Transformers cast don't appear to be playable at the beginning, Jagex has suggested that there will be opportunities to take control of iconic bots during certain points in the game.
Right: Fans of Dinobots shouldn't feel left out. Jagex has suggested that they will appear at some point in *Transformers Universe*.



THE TRANSFORMATION

DURING THE DEVELOPMENT of *Transformers Universe*, developer Jagex changed things up significantly and moved away from its proprietary tech in favour of an engine that would offer them more creative freedom. While it has many benefits on both a gameplay and design level, assistant lead animator David Hines suggests that it could also enable *Transformers Universe* to make the jump to consoles in the future: "The reason we shifted over to Unity is that it gives us so much flexibility in terms of going onto different platforms," he states before reiterating that it has only been confirmed for one format to date. "We're exclusively focusing on PC. But, again, as an animator, it gives us so much flexibility and freedom to get our ideas on the screen."

Right: We've only really seen land-based Transformers to date but Jagex has suggested that we'll see more other vehicles and transformation types in the coming months.



Transformers Universe

CONCEPT ■ The evergreen Eighties toy brand enjoys another virtual expansion, making the jump into the massively multiplayer arena courtesy of *RuneScape* developer Jagex.

Prime time entertainment

"I think it's that change in landscape," responds Jagex's assistant lead animator, David Hines, when quizzed on the exact nature of a MOTA – the novel acronym recently applied to *Transformers Universe*. "MMOs were very popular but then MOBAs came in and suddenly they're just as popular as MMOs. [*Transformers Universe*] hasn't changed, it has just evolved. We've customised it to its strength. It's not an MMO or a MOBA, it's a MOTA, it's our own thing."

Hines points out that the studio's latest browser-based free-to-play title has lifted inspiration from a variety of sources, looking both at the history of the MMO genre (no doubt at its own success with *RuneScape*) and at the likes of *League Of Legends* – the phenomenon that has catapulted the Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) into widespread acclaim. A MOTA is – aside from a canny automobile-engineered play on words, short for Massive Online Tactical Arena – an amalgamation of MMO and MOBA. The concept alone should give an indication of just how ambitious the Cambridge-based outfit's latest project is.

Of all the licences that have been retrofitted to the model of any massively-multiplayer excursion, Transformers arrives ready formed. Robots that can transform into a range of military vehicles and come equipped with an absurd amount of firepower that it makes it perfect for any variation on the MMO/MOBA model.

But rather than taking on the role of one of the established Autobots or Decepticons, you select a bot from a choice of new characters, pick a faction and choose your class, weapons and which type of vehicle they'll transform into.

/// With a heavy focus on 4v4 PvP battles, this is aimed squarely at the *League Of Legends* crowd, the gameplay itself demanding a skilful balance of powers against specific enemy types to whittle down opposing forces.

On the actual battlefield it can all look a lot like utter chaos, with giant robots kicking the bolts out of one another. But Hines states, from an animation perspective that it was important to make the action look as seamless as possible, particularly when it came down to the animating the iconic transformations.

"From day one, as an animator, our priority was that, it's a Transformers game, it has to have fantastic transformations," he says. "We know this is a browser game but we're blurring the line between console and browser. We want to be able to make intricate transformations. A lot of time and effort has been put into making the bots actually look like they're transforming accurately – if you trace the line of a wheel you'll actually see that wheel it transform into a part of the robot. We've tried to make that look believable and worked with designers to make it as balanced as possible."

That doesn't mean that they will be 100 per cent precise in the transformations, with Hines admitting some sleight of hand will be in place. Not that it matters. Jagex is lifting inspiration from various iterations of the Transformers franchise over the years, reaching back to Generation One, the Eighties cartoon, Michael Bay flicks and even the recent, now-axed *Transformers Prime* series.

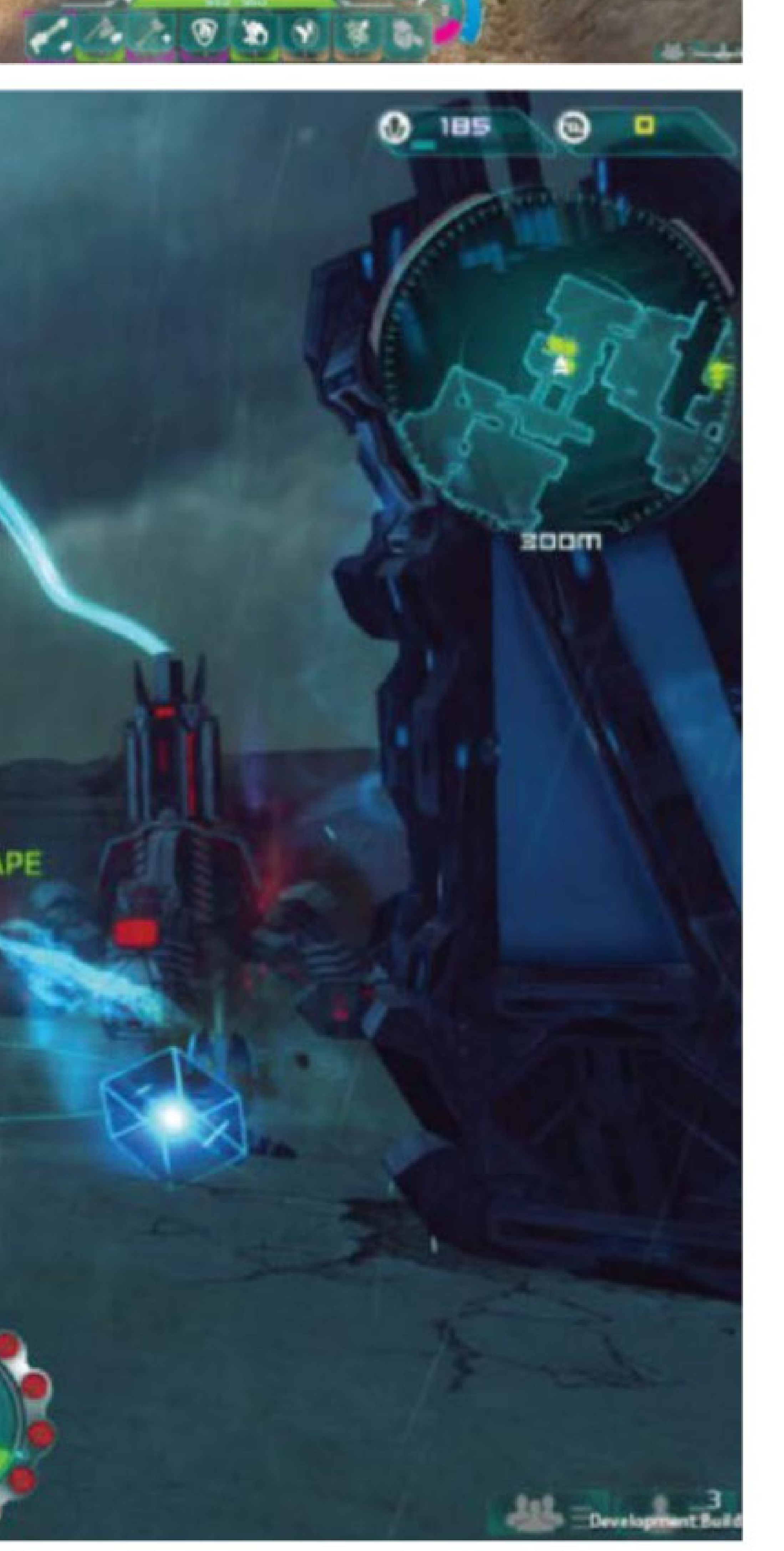
Jagex is calling it the Generations universe, and the design is certainly a broad approach at satisfying all the various subsets of fandom the series has accumulated over the years. The studio will have achieved the impossible if it manages to please everyone (the lack of playable Optimus Prime is sure to rile some fans alone) but one feature that's sure to be the most contentious is the creation of new characters. It might cause uproar in the community, but for long-time *Transformers* fan Hines, it has been pure wish fulfilment.

"As a Transformers fan, the best thing for me is being able to create brand new Transformers," he enthuses. "You all know Optimus Prime, Bumblebee and Jazz, but we're actually getting an opportunity at Jagex to create new bots never before seen, establishing their personalities. As an animator, how does he move? How does he transform? It's being at the forefront of creating these new bots.

"As the name suggests, we're creating a whole universe," Hines goes on to conclude. "There are just endless possibilities in terms of what we create."

"We're actually getting an opportunity at Jagex to create new bots never before seen"

DAVID HINES, JAGEX





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: UK
Publisher: Jagex
Developer: In-house
Release: Summer 2014
Genre: MMO
Players: Massively Multiplayer

Developer Profile


A successful developer and publisher, Jagex has been operating since 2001 when it launched *RuneScape* – its immensely popular browser-based free-to-play MMORPG. It's dabbled in other areas, releasing *Ace Of Spades*, *War Of Legends* and *8Realms*, but *Transformers Universe* represents the company's biggest launch outside of its debut release.

Developer History

RuneScape 3 **2013 [PC]**
Ace Of Spades **2012 [PC]**
8Realms **2011 [PC]**
RuneScape **2001 [PC]**

High Point

RuneScape continues to go from strength to strength, with its latest iteration, *RuneScape 3*, refining the formula to a startling degree.



■ Inset: We're hoping the retrospective nature of the game gives the title's narrative a little more dignity and maturity than other gung-ho, 'kill these dudes!' WWII FPS games.

■ Inset: There will be four main style of play open to you as you progress through the game; we're most excited about the stealthy elements.

■ Inset: In an age of cumbersome UIs and messy HUDs, the succinct minimap in the bottom looks like a minimalist treat.

Enemy Front

CONCEPT ■ An American war correspondent does a road-trip of war-torn Europe, reliving his experiences of the various theatres of war that opened up during World War II.

Because the pen is mightier than the sword

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Origin: Poland
Publisher: Bandai Namco Games
Developer: CI Interactive
Release: 10 June
Players: 1 (2-12 online)

Developer Profile

CI Games (who started out as City Interactive) was established in 2002 when Polish publisher Lemon Interactive merged with two smaller Polish development teams. Since then, the company has established itself as a worthy publisher *and* developer, most notable for producing the *Sniper: Ghost Warrior* series of games.

Developer History

Alien Rage
2013 [Multi]
Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2
2013 [Multi]
Sniper: Ghost Warrior
2010 [Multi]

High Point

The multiplayer component of *Alien Rage* was an example of thoughtful level design and balancing, and was executed with great pace. It's just a shame the servers were always so empty…

Go back a decade or so, and it seemed the games industry was swamped with cookie-cutter World War II FPS games – the trend that set off the FPS boom that's carried on, unfettered, ever since. But as developers and gamers have gotten more and more used to wielding virtual guns and looking down virtual iron sights, the humble WWII shooter has seen a steep decline. There are still a few titles in the genre seeing releases, but the market has certainly quietened down. CI Games noted this, and is attempting to revalidate and reinvigorate the genre with what the studio calls 'the first truly modern WWII FPS'. We had the chance to sit down with Steve Hart, executive producer at CI Games, to chat about what this game is bringing to back to the genre.

The last generation saw FPSs shift away from World War II and into modern conflict – why was the setting right for CI Games's new IP?

There's been a number of WWII shooters released over the last two or three years, with the *Sniper Elite* series and *Red Orchestra* even, and they've gotten quite a bit of attention. And what you see a lot of the time with these titles, a lot of the chat within the market, is customers ready to return back to the setting. This is, as far as I'm aware, the first console/PC commercial product as an FPS that's coming back into WWII. We think there's a lot of interest in it: we engage with the communities through social channels and a lot of people are excited about it. We certainly don't come into this thinking we are going to shift *Call Of Duty* or *Battlefield* numbers, by any stretch, but we do think that there is a real thirst for this sort of material.

***Enemy Front* is taking a look at some of the conflicts videogames usually ignore – such as Poland**

> "This is an FPS that's coming back into WWII, and we think there is a real thirst for this sort of material"
> STEVE HART, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

and Norway. Are you re-creating famous battles or are you taking creative licence?

It's a bit of both really. Certainly for CI Games there's a lot of pride that's gone into this. The development team has worked tirelessly to try and do the Warsaw Uprising as much justice as possible, because it is on their doorstop and it happened to their grandparents. Everywhere you go in Warsaw today there is a monument on almost every corner to represent some part of the Uprising; it is quite remarkable. So to get the Uprising itself into a piece of entertainment, they've been careful to a degree with the creative licence. There's nothing too crazy, or zany, or mad in there – it is a serious shooter. And then there's trying to rebuild Warsaw to make it look like it did at the time, which sort of pays homage to it… but for sure, we've taken creative licence.

Typically, one of the biggest problems with modern FPS games is their reliance on set-piece driven gameplay. How are you looking to combat this?

We have a few of these exotic moments throughout the game, just to break it up a bit, but because we provide a toolset to the player – with the four gameplay styles and the mechanics that they can use to complement their style of play – it keeps things fresh, it keeps things focused on the ways that the player wants to play it. So we don't have to put a blocker or channel the player through a very linear scripted section to get a big wow moment. We don't need to do that. The core experience is there and it's solid from the off. While we have these moments, they are there for interest and variety, rather than to just keep up some Hollywood blockbuster presentation.

We get a strong Ernest Hemingway meets Hunter S. Thompson vibe from the game; can you go into a little more detail on the story and its influences?

You know what, it is kind of like that. The back-story of the character himself, Robert Hawkins, is that he had previous combat experience – I think before his journalistic days in the Spanish Civil War, 20 years prior – so he's seasoned. What we are really trying to do is to tell a story of resistance.

We have the Warsaw Uprising, which is within the game's timeline, current day, and then we have these flashbacks, which are our sandbox levels where we are travelling through France, Norway and Germany, all meeting up with Resistance fighters against the Nazis. In terms of narrative, it means we can get a good coverage across the different areas and examples of the Resistance across World War II.



Inset: For saying that player character is a journalist, he certainly has some skills with varied and technical weaponry.

Inset: For a journalist, the player character certainly has some skills with weaponry. Here he is, taking out a Nazi with a sniper.

TALKING ABOUT MY GENERATION

"THE GAME HAS been in development for two or three years now," Hart told us when we asked him about the game's release on last-gen consoles. "When the game first entered development, the business plan wasn't for it to come out on next-gen platforms. When you're part way, or halfway, or near the end of development and think 'yeah, let's move it forward' – that's not so easy. We understand from the business side of it that it's a new IP on an old platform, and that's not great, but we have faith in the product and it's a good platform to test the market to see if a thirst for WWII [shooters] is still out there. If the product performs well, who knows where it could go."

Evolve

CONCEPT ■ The studio that brought you *Left 4 Dead* pitch a four-versus-one co-operative game, where a team of hunters try to take down a rampaging monster.

Belly of the beast

"We've got two games in one almost," enthuses 2K's international producer, Iain Willows. "Although we've got something that's very familiar on one side, which is the FPS element and co-op, it does require that extra co-operation as a team. We concentrated on establishing that, not only in the individual hunters and how they act alone but also how they interact."

He's currently discussing the amount of education required for *Evolve*, after **games™** rather embarrassingly fumbles its way through the jungles as the hulking Goliath – one of the game's many fearsome player-controlled monsters that the human avatars must hunt.

While operating as one of the human hunters is relatively standard FPS fare – albeit, tweaked with enough weight on specific classes to mix up gameplay – playing as the Goliath is, for lack of a better term, a different beast entirely.

A big focus therefore has been put into teaching the players how to control the creature. It's an alien control scheme, forcing players to adapt to the environment and kill and feed to evolve into a stronger character. Once you've reached the third and final evolution stage, you're then able to take on the side objective that could potentially net a game win.

For us, after a couple of rounds it was clear that combat takes some getting used to. This was not because we were hampered by any sloppy controls, but just because the monster can take a huge amount of damage, and with little room to escape, you're forced to face the fight head-on.

/// We're privy to the latest build that has refined a lot of the mechanics since it was first debuted to the press, which, alongside some visual enhancements, has made some fundamental changes to the monster itself. "The biggest change we've made since the reveal is in the monster abilities," explains Willows. "It used to be when you started the game as the monster you could choose two abilities and every time you levelled up you could choose another one. Now we've put in a point system so you can assign skill points into each of your abilities."

This adds a lot more variety as to the way the game can be played in so much that you can personalise your experience through your own decisions. You can go aggressive, for instance placing three points into Rock Throw, giving the player one super-powerful ability. However, if the hunters figure out you're only operating with one skill, they can use that to their advantage. It both creates a new dynamic way to play and makes the whole experience deeply customisable.

"It's undergoing work everyday," says Willows, going into detail as to some of the more obvious enhancements in the current build. "It's getting closer to that visual quality we want. It's actually improving in terms of looks, visuals, the lighting of the map you've seen is very much different, there's a lot more in terms of darkness and dynamic lighting going on. The monster has gone through a lot of changes in terms of animation – he had stock animations before. Now they're much more contextual to what is in front of it, whether it's attack on the left and right – it gives much more variety to attacks."

> "The other monsters will be quite different enough to change the game"
> IAIN WILLOWS, 2K GAMES

What both the Willows and Turtle Rock Studios teams are anticipating is that players will find themselves singling out a particular hunter character to progress with, or, even, a specific monster.

"I can't put a figure on it but there are multiple monsters," says Willows. "The Goliath is the standard monster you might imagine, the big bipedal brute like King Kong. The other monsters will be quite different enough to change the game."

What's more promising is that there's so much left to be revealed about the game as it nears release. With one monster, one map and one game mode only shown off so far, *Evolve* has the potential to be a rare beast indeed – a game that actually surprises the player. It's one that has become something of an endangered species.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One
Origin: US
Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: Turtle Rock Studios
Release: Summer 2014
Genre: First-Person Shooter
Players: 1-5

Developer Profile

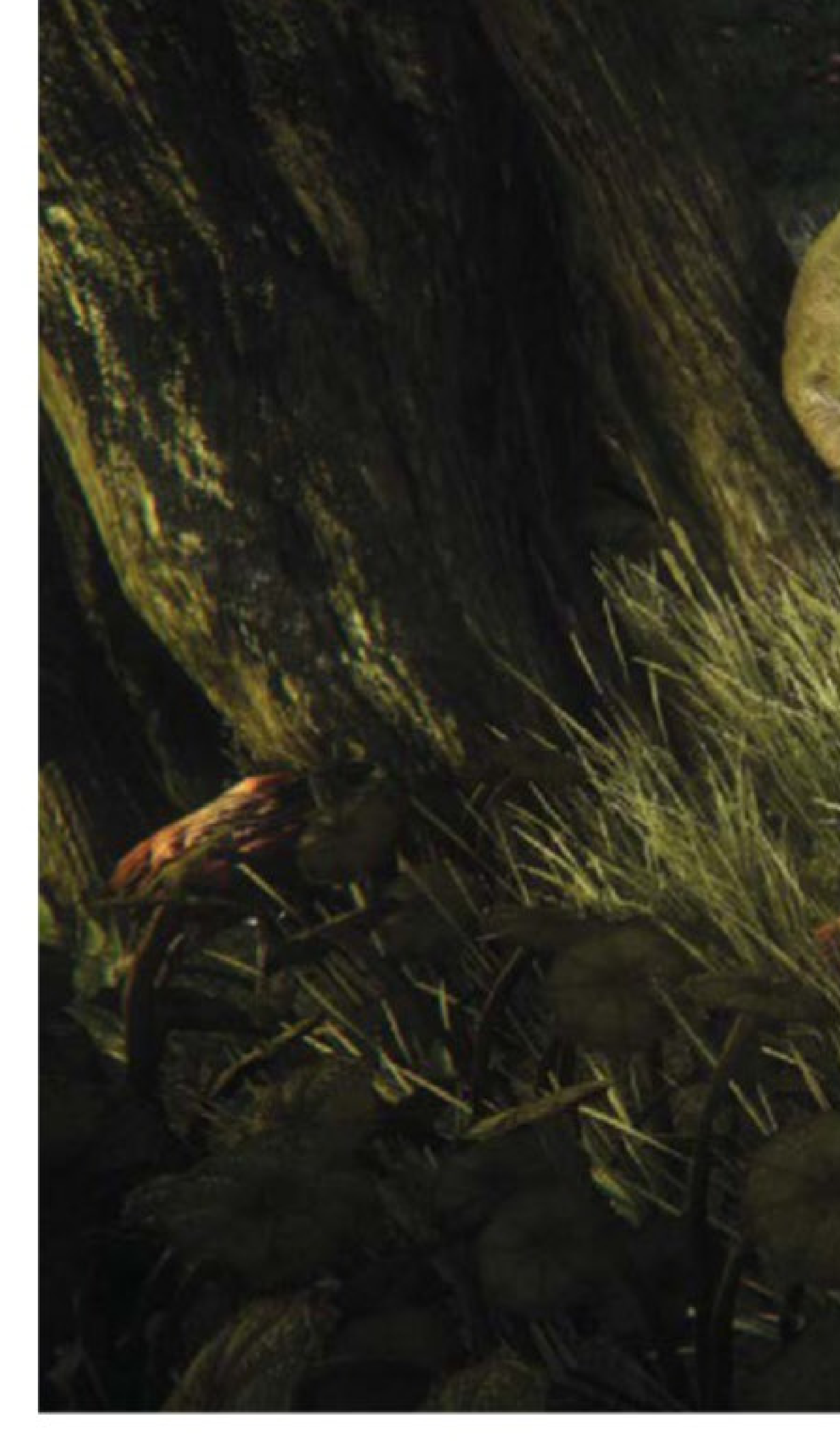
Turtle Rock Studios has had quite a convoluted history in the 12 years it has been operating. The simple version is that it was founded in March 2002 and shortly after began work on *Left 4 Dead*. Valve bought the company, then subsequently shut it down, with its founders then reforming the company, at first working on casual titles before then moving on to target the *TripleA* market once more.

Developer History

Leap Sheep!
2010 [iOS]
Left 4 Dead/Left 4 Dead 2 DLC
2009 [PC, Xbox 360]
Left 4 Dead
2008 [PC, Xbox 360]
Counter-Strike: Condition Zero
2004 [PC]

High Point

Left 4 Dead became the studio's calling card, surpassing its ambition to become the quintessential co-operative shooter.





■ Right: Out of the four hunter classes, the Trapper seemed to have the most integral role in both finding and containing the monster.



FEELING PERKY

ANOTHER MINOR CHANGE since the game was revealed is the perk system. Littered across the map are a variety of perks (such as health regeneration) hidden inside elite animals – bigger members of the wildlife that can be tricky to take down. In the previous build, perks used to be on timers, and lasted a few minutes. Now they have been tweaked to last an entire round. While the power of each perk has been turned down, the result is more dynamic play, as players can stack them on top of each other. Of course, you'll have to find them first, and that's not the easiest thing when you're either being hunted by a giant space beast or four gun-toting hunters looking for a prize.

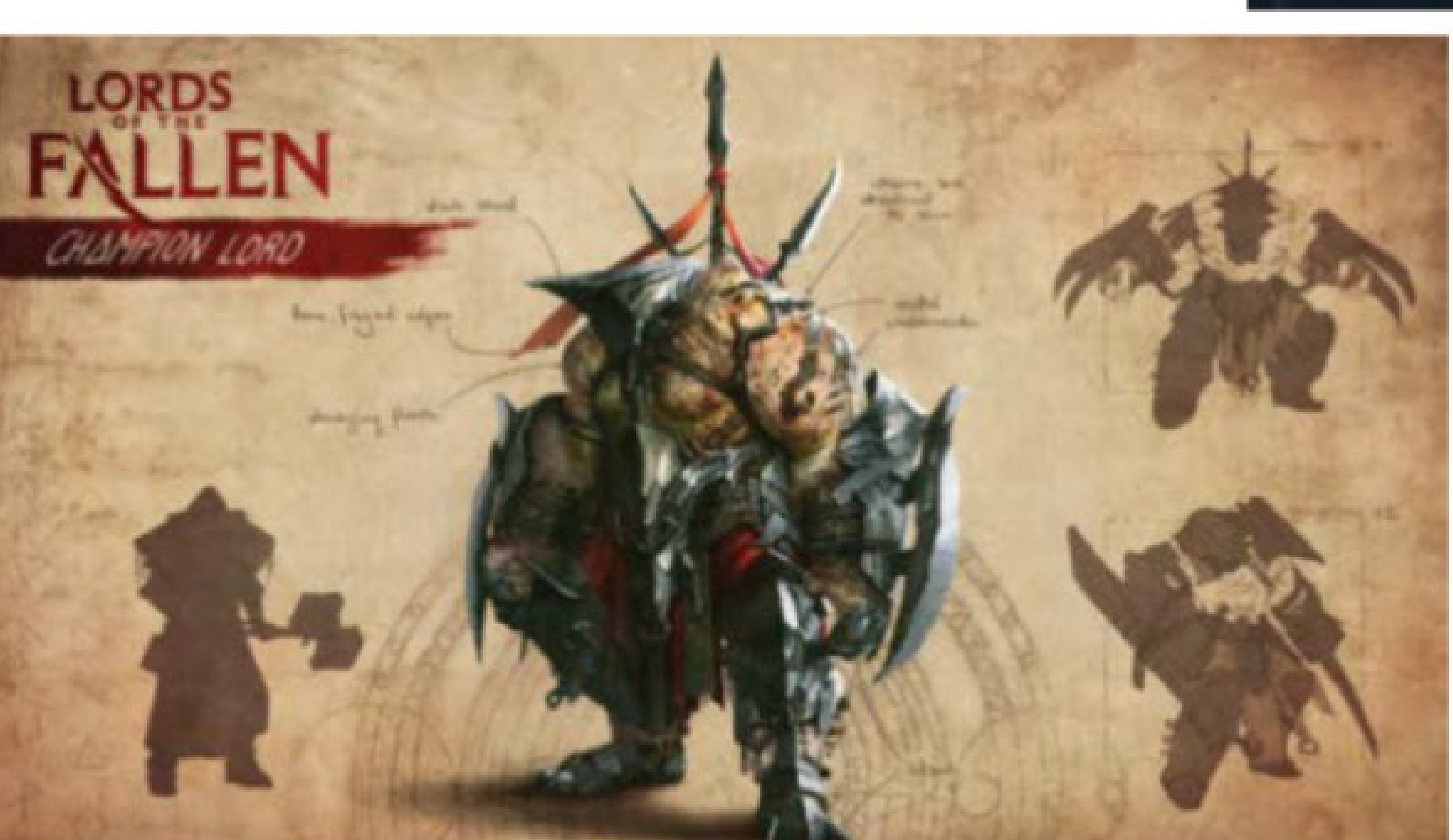


The monster itself challenges your perception of a first-person shooter. What's important to remember is that the Goliath can take a huge amount of damage and that you should focus your attacks on taking out one or two enemies at a time. Left: All different animals in the environment can be killed and eaten as a monster to allow you to level up. Bigger animals will make you level up faster.

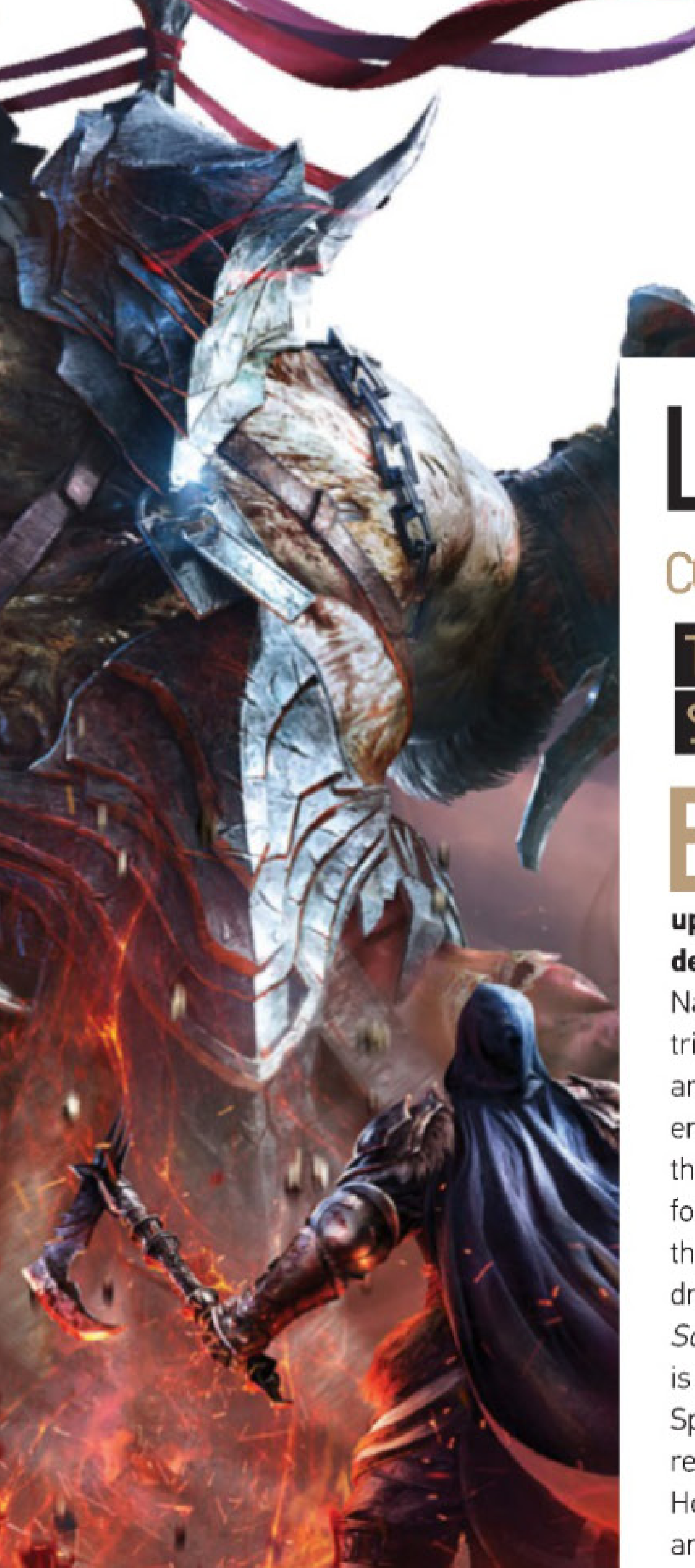
Below: A general sense of doom pervades everything we've seen of *LOTF* so far, so don't expect green glades or flower beds.

CHAMPION LORD

IMMATURE IN NAME, muscle-bound in nature, 'Champion Lord' is one of the commanders of the demonic army attacking *Lords Of The Fallen*'s world. Equipped with forearm blades and a direct charge attack, what he lacks in grace and finesse he makes up for in sheer intensity and a seemingly unlimited pool of stamina. Seeing him in action in our demo reveals the best way to tackle him is to continually circle at a distance and wear down his health with ranged magic attacks. It's all a little bit *Dark Souls*. As soon as he begins his charge you should dodge out of the way and let him run straight into the wall of the circular room in which he resides, this stuns him and allows you to attack from behind. Repeat until dead.



Right: Looting chests and enemies will be of great benefit, leading to new and more powerful items, weapons and armour. Some chests will also require a bit of puzzle-solving ability.



Lords Of The Fallen



CONCEPT ■ An RPG heavily focused on challenging players through the difficulty and diversity of its combat system, with mastery of the core concepts facilitating exploration.

The first genuine challenger for Dark Souls' tough-as-nails RPG crown?

Every victory is born from defeat. That's one of the taglines attached to *Lords Of The Fallen*, one that sums up succinctly the kind of experience developer CI Games aims to provide. Namely, a challenging one. One that requires trial and error, one that requires patience and the persistence to learn how combat, enemies and the environment work down to the smallest possible detail. From that, and the foreboding tone of the images that populate these pages, it's likely that you're already drawing similarities to the as-of-yet-unrivalled *Souls* games. You'd be right to, the approach is undoubtedly similar, there's even an 'XP Spirit' system which bears near-identical resemblance to 'soul recovery' from Souls. However, *LOTF* isn't set on being quite so arduous as From Software's masterful trilogy.

"[*LOTF*] is an action RPG," explains executive producer Tomasz Gop. "I stress the word action because we like to think that we're more on that side than we are on the story-driven side. What's also important is that we really want this to feel like a challenging game, where you're learning and mastering the tactics and combat system. However, at the same time, we're not trying to be punishing."

/// From what we've seen, combat is faster and the hero, Harkyn, is more agile than any of the classes that populate the *Souls* trilogy. His agility seems to be capable of getting you out of potentially tricky situations, at least so far as giving you the opportunity to retreat, regroup and retry without dying each time. That's not to say you'll never get hit, and heavier armour types slow you down significantly, but mastery of movement looks to play a key role in survival and success. Come across a difficult enemy and you can use the environment to your advantage. After failing to dent a heavily-armoured demon-knight's health bar with sword and magical fireball attack, Harkyn shuffles backwards as the enemy advances.

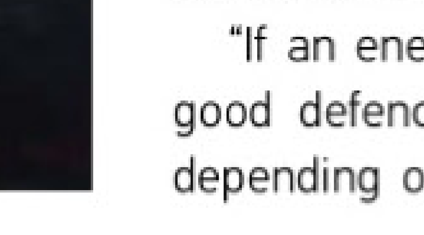
"If an enemy is heavily armoured and has good defence then that can be challenging depending on what point of the game you're playing," explains Gop. "You can use different tactics, though, like starting with a magical spell to lure him towards you."

Harkyn encourages the knight towards him, positioning himself so the demon has no choice but to walk across a set of wooden planks laid across a round hole in the floor. Harkyn can walk over these safely in light armour, but the knight is too heavy. The planks break and he plummets to his death. "You can always try to make it easier for yourself like that if you want to," Gop continues, "but if he drops down the hole and dies then you can't get his loot. It's up to you to decide how you want to handle those situations."

Other enemies will present different problems. The 'infested' have a chance of reanimating when killed, forcing you to wait and see if they're going to 'zombify' before you move on; the last thing you want is to get caught by surprise from behind. Then there are poisonous spiders that must be killed quickly to prevent them from laying eggs that hatch in a matter of seconds. These creatures are members of a demonic army that hasn't threatened human life for a very long time. Why is the army attacking mankind now, after so many years of quiet? That still remains a mystery.

> "You can always try out new tactics if you die. For us that's the basis of fun, entertainment and pleasurable learning"
>
> TOMASZ GOP, CITY INTERACTIVE

"We've made the entire lore up ourselves as this game isn't part of a larger franchise," Gop says. "It's a medieval fantasy world where, a couple of thousand years before the start of the game, humanity has successfully beaten the god of the world and his demonic army. Because of what [humanity] has achieved they believe they're capable of completing removing evil from human nature." Perhaps the unexpected rise of the demon army is designed as a metaphor for the fact that human evil is always bubbling, unseen, below the surface of our collective will. Perhaps not. *LOTF* still has more than enough up its well-armed sleeve to pique our interest at this stage.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC/PlayStation 4/ Xbox One
Origin: Poland
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: CI Games
Release: UK/US: Q3 2014 (Japan: TBC)
Genre: Action-RPG
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Tomasz Gop spent five years at CD Projekt RED, working on *The Witcher* and *The Witcher 2*. It was the latter that propelled him to fame, acting as senior producer on the console editions of the RPG. In 2011, prior to work finishing on the PC version of *The Witcher*, Gop switched to CI Games to become executive producer on *Lords Of The Fallen*.

Developer History

The Witcher 2
2011 [PC, Xbox 360]
The Witcher
2007 [PC]

High Point

While *The Witcher* is undoubtedly a game of superlative quality, *The Witcher 2* manages to outdo its predecessor in both scale and quality of execution. Without question, *The Witcher 2* is a contender for 'best RPG of the 360 era'.



Left: Malfunctioning androids roam the base with malicious intentions; attacking them isn't the wisest idea given your limited arsenal, so don't be afraid to run away if you hear one approaching.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: UK
Publisher: TBA
Developer: Lunar Software
Release: TBA 2014
Genre: Survival horror
Players: 1

Developer Profile

A small, new indie outfit based in the UK and comprising of just four people, Lunar Software was founded by an ex Eurocom staffer. The studio's first project is *Routine* – an ambitious space-set survival horror title running on Unreal Engine 3 - which was originally due out at the beginning of 2013 but has since slipped back into the latter half of 2014.

Developer History

Routine
2014 [PC]

High Point

The studio's only game to date, *Routine* isn't even out yet but is shaping up to be an incredibly polished and atmospheric title.

Routine

CONCEPT ■ You explore a derelict space station, discovering the truth behind the horrific events that have unfolded on board. It's not *Alien: Isolation*.

There's always room for more space

It's easy to make comparisons between *Routine* and Creative Assembly's upcoming *Alien: Isolation*. Both are set in a late-Seventies/early-Eighties vision of a grimy future where mankind has explored the farthest reaches of the galaxy, where technology is still running on giant mainframes churning through tape and disks as it displays information in a few lines of dotted green text.

However, fresh indie outfit Lunar Software would perhaps prefer comparisons to similar low-fi venture *Slender*. Both construct a relentlessly tense atmosphere, both feature permadeath as a major feature and both share a joyous curiosity for its surroundings.

This is a stripped-back survival horror experience, tasking players to poke around darkened corners and beneath flickering lights to discover its secrets – which come in the form of a series of floppy discs, revealing the nature of the mysterious disappearance of the derelict lunar research facility's crew.

There are other interesting elements at play too that keeps players on their toes. It's non-linear in structure and includes randomised environmental hazards, AI locations and aids.

■ The eerie soundtrack is provided by Mick Gordan, whose works includes *Need For Speed: The Run*, *Killer Instinct* and *Wolfenstein: The New Order* for Xbox One.

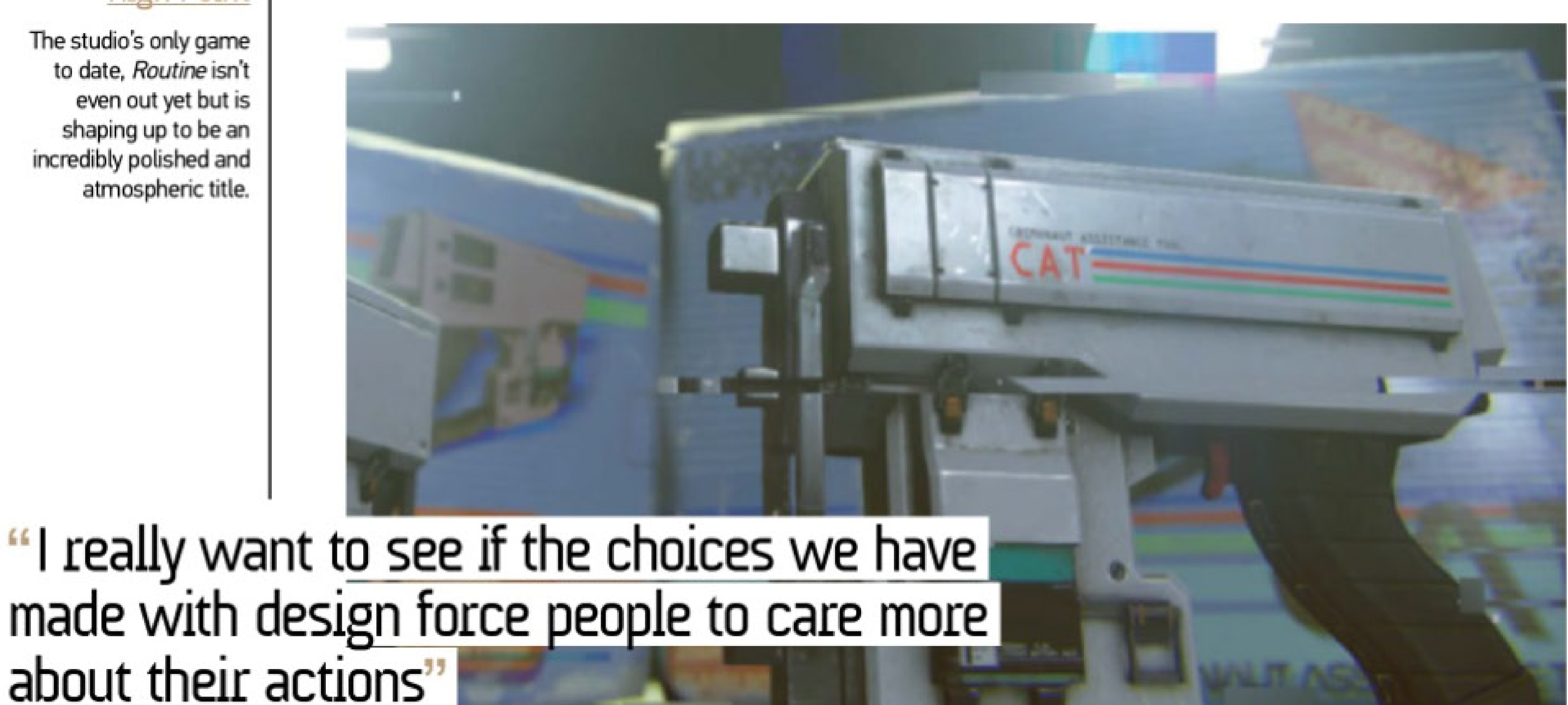
And, similar to another intergalactic survival horror franchise, there's no HUD, health bars or other on-screen clutter to distract from the terror taking place in front of your retinas.

It follows a tradition of recent independent survival horror titles that prioritise exploration over combat. There will be some form of latter in the game, but the developer has stated that it's used as a last resort rather than a way to progress further through the game.

The one weapon you're afforded is the Cosmonaut Assistance Tool. It has two batteries (used to power the screen), can hack devices and power a debilitating blast. It's simple enough but with a limited charge, just two blasts at any of the haywire robots patroling the corridors could leave you battery depleted and your torch no longer operational.

It's a balance that appears effective from the footage released. Rather than bottlenecking players into one playstyle over the other, skill can be used to survive encounters if the player is savvy with their resources.

The game has been delayed a few times now, Lunar Software polishing the visuals and tweaking the AI and environmental features to create a challenge for those that set foot inside its world. Titles such as *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* and *Slender* have changed the face of the modern horror game with unique approaches to the genre, and *Routine* stands out as another fine example of a simple concept being realised in a way that should captivate the PC community.



"I really want to see if the choices we have made with design force people to care more about their actions"
AARON FOSTER, LEAD DESIGNER

■ Right *Valkyrie* has been demoed as both a showcase for the capabilities of both Oculus Rift and Sony's Project Morpheus. Whether or not VR becomes a 'thing' remains to be seen, but CCP's space shooter is a tantalising prospect either way. ■ Below: CCP has established one of the most engaging online universes in the medium and its expansions continue to expand on the lore.



ALL GUNS BLAZING

CCP HAS PROVED itself wildly ambitious when it comes to pushing the boundaries of what's possible on a technical level (*Eve*'s single-server architecture and *Dust 514* integration are plenty proof of that), but when it comes to nailing a game from the get-go, CCP has often missed the target. With *Valkyrie* there's a sense that CCP wants to prove itself able to launch a superlative v1.0 rather than patch one in later, not least because in finding themselves at the vanguard of VR development, there isn't just the success of a game to worry about, but perhaps even the future of VR gaming as a medium. After all, it's solid games that sell hardware, not vague promises of what may be possible.



■ Right: Team deathmatch, escort/assault and a variant on capture the flag are some multiplayer modes planned. There may be a string of single-player missions, but they're likely to form a lengthy tutorial rather than part of a dynamic campaign.



Eve: Valkyrie

CONCEPT ■ First-person spaceship combat from the makers of Eve Online. Will require a VR headset: either Oculus Rift or Sony's Project Morpheus will do just fine.

World of spaceships

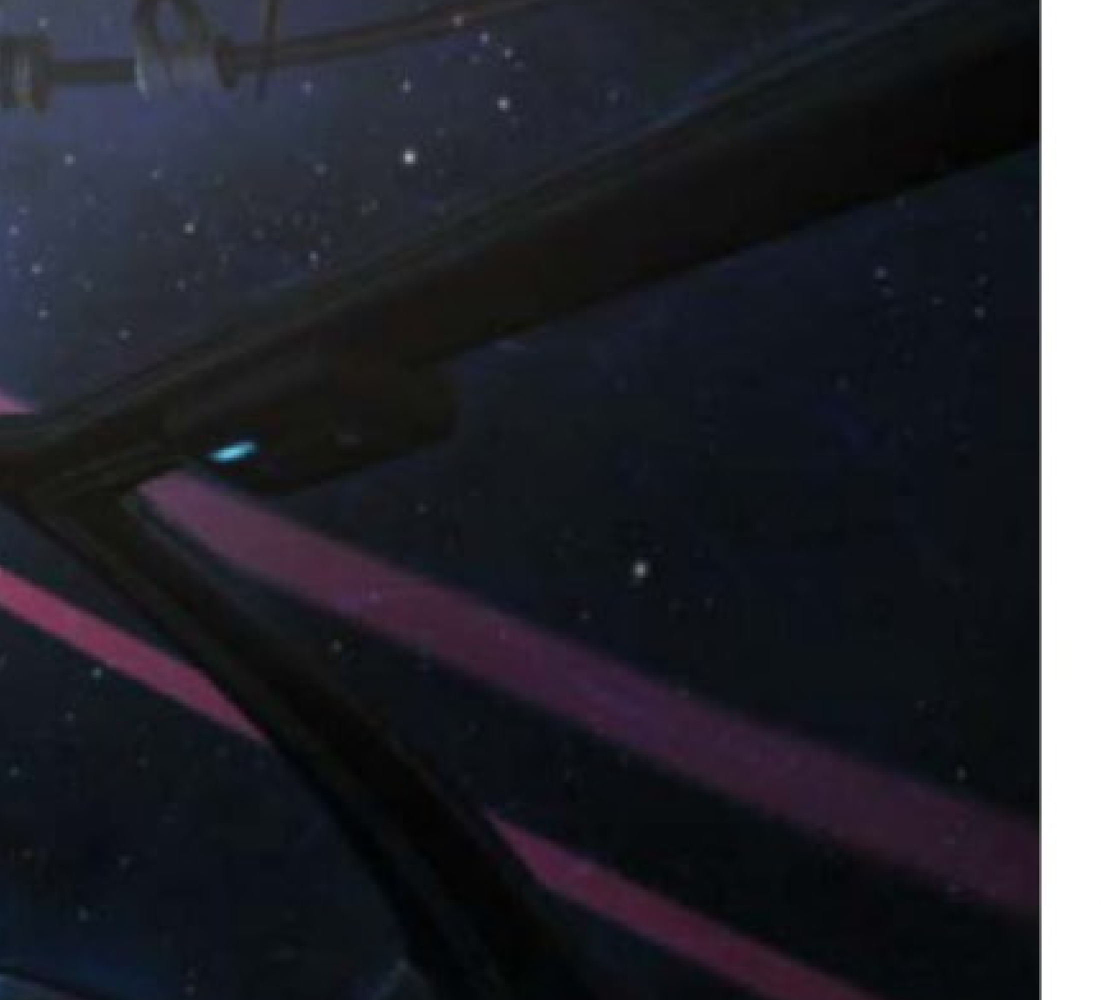
E*ve Online*, the game equivalent of being mugged on the way home from work, is getting a second spin-off in as many years in the form of *Valkyrie*, a multiplayer space combat game set within CCP's long-established New Eden universe. Unlike last year's PS3 shooter *Dust 514*, which impressively allowed *Eve*'s admirals to supply death from above and beyond the game itself, *Valkyrie* is focused around a simpler design. There will be no cross-platform argy-bargy going on, nor many of *Eve*'s solar and gameplay systems to get lost in: no bewildering industrial production, go galaxy-spanning economy and no colourful gunboat diplomacy between thousands-strong coalitions. *Valkyrie* will be – initially at least – a good old-fashioned dogfight where wings of fighters and bombers launch from their carriers and fight to the death in cordoned-off space arenas. Pilots will likely earn a few credits or experience points for their efforts and unlock the odd new variety of laser or space torpedo as they ascend the ranks, but there'll be none of that ganging up, back-stabbing, resource-stealing, mass warfare going on that we hear so much about in the wider and singular New Eden universe.

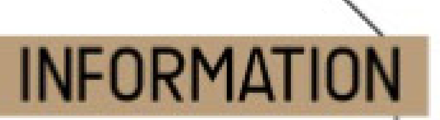
/// Seeing as Iceland's biggest game developer likes to make hard work for itself in its ongoing quest to do stuff differently, the question begs itself as to why CCP are making such an outwardly simplistic standalone game. The answer of course is that while across these flat pages *Valkyrie* may look like a pretty sci-fi homage to *World Of Tanks*, in the flesh the game will look very much different since it will require a virtual reality headset to enjoy. If you think such an investment seems unnecessary for such an insubstantial game, rest assured that we had multiple sessions with it at last year's Eve Fanfest when it was a mere tech demo and even though it was running on the early Oculus Rift dev kit, with its less-than-stellar tracking and low-resolution optics, we emerged from the visor feeling like we'd just come back from the future. "If anyone needs convincing," says CCP's Owen O'Brien on the appeal of VR. "I would say just try out the new tech. Nothing anyone can say can compare to actually experiencing it."

It starts an awful lot like a Viper launch sequence from *Battlestar Galactica*, with a tremendous rush of speed as the walls of the hangar bay blur past your peripheral vision. Then before you know it your mothership is behind you and you're in the immensity of outer space, living the dream of cinematic space battles as the lines of *Star Wars*' climactic Death Star battle run through your subconscious mind. ("Stay on target…", "Negative, it just impacted on the surface.") Meanwhile, back in reality you're grinning like a loon with a shoebox strapped to your face and drooling just enough to worry the next in the queue – such is the price of being blown away at a public gaming event. Needless to say that we're eager to get our heads in the latest version, with its asteroid fields, space stations and greater variety of ships and weapons, although we have to express a preference for the version now due for the PS4's Morpheus, purely on the basis of the DualShock 4 being a far more natural and capable VR controller than your standard PC pad.

With the game now in full-on development at CCP's Newcastle outpost, the 25-person studio is still working on getting the look right, with many of the game's features still to be decided upon. If that seems a little slapdash given how quickly the initial tech demo was cobbled together, it's worth bearing in mind that not only is VR tech in a constant state of flux, with the host hardware still to be locked down, there aren't too many VR games for CCP to look to for inspiration. Perfecting tracking, latency and frame rate isn't just about throwing every cycle of processing power at the problem, but inching towards a delicate balance by painstaking trial and error. Given how far *Eve* has come in 11 years and *Dust 514* has come in one due to those methods, it would seem that CCP is the right team to have on board.

> "I don't think anything is inevitable when dealing with cutting-edge tech… we fully support VR and feel it is a genuine advance"
>
> OWEN O'BRIEN, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, CCP GAMES





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, PC
Origin: UK
Publisher: CCP Games
Developer: CCP Newcastle
Release: 2014
Genre: Space shooter
Players: 1-12

Developer Profile

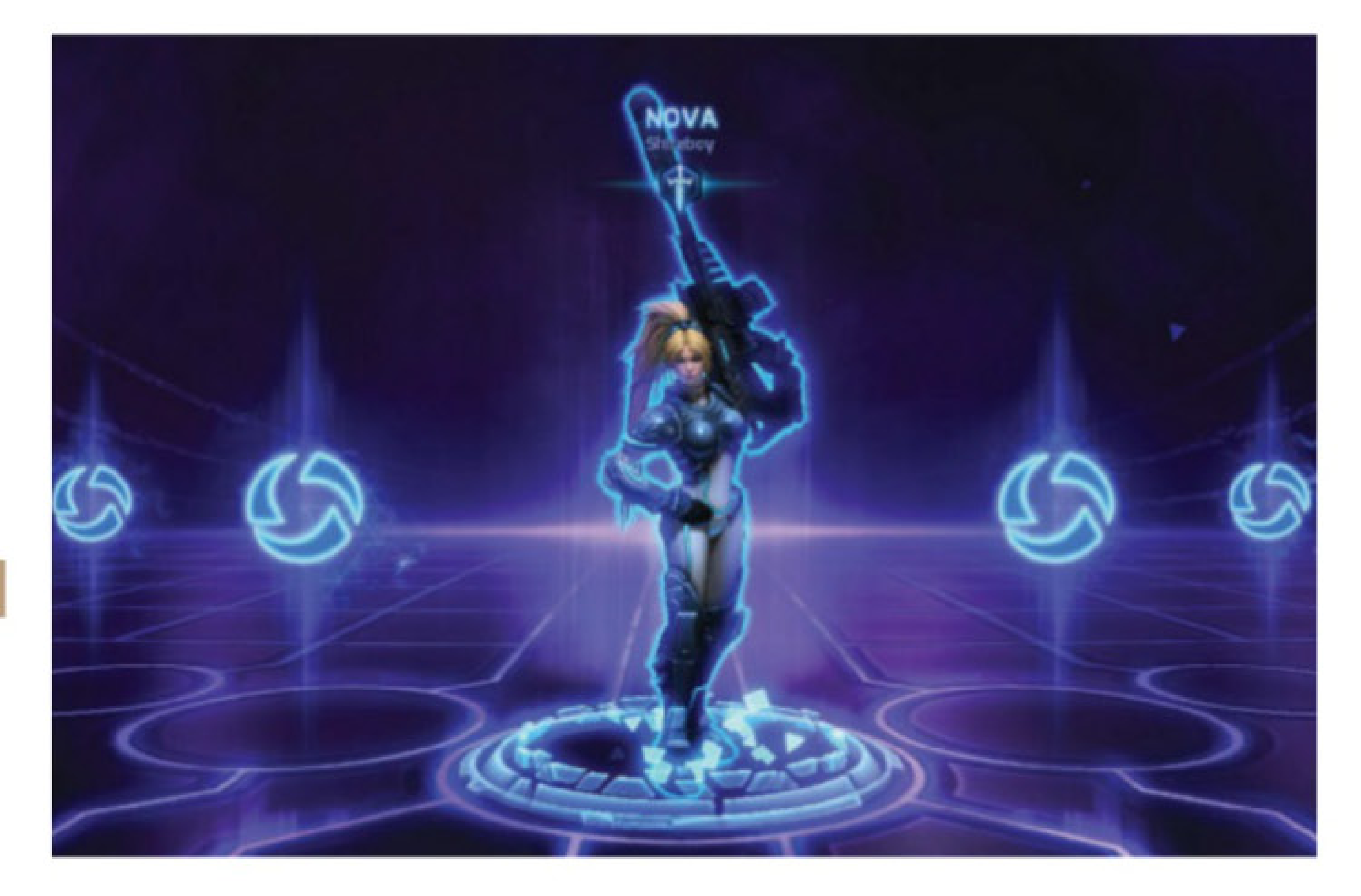
Established in 1997 by a bunch of mildly-irked MMO gamers who wanted to create a cross between *Ultima Online*, *Elite* and *Magic: The Gathering*, CCP Games has gone on to establish studios in the UK, US and China, releasing 20 expansions for *Eve Online* and even a couple of board games.

Developer History

Eve: Valkyrie
2014 [PS4, PC]
Dust 514
2013 [PS3]
Eve Online
2003 [PC, Mac]

High Point

It may not have the millions of *World Of Warcraft*, but *Eve Online* is the only MMOG that has grown each successive year since it launched, and while *Dust 514* hasn't quite hit the same heights on console, the fact that two platforms and genres can co-exist simultaneously is mighty impressive.



■ Left: Currently the available numbers of players is drastically low, which helpfully encourages players to use the global chat to party up.

Heroes Of The Storm

CONCEPT ■ Blizzard's ironic attempt at entering the MOBA genre, outside of *Warcraft 3*'s original mod, anyway. Accessibility and simplicity are key here.

A zerg, a nightelf and the devil walk into a battlefield…

Considering the hardcore appeal Blizzard tends to receive, it's easy to overlook the developer's approach to simple gameplay for complex results. Accessibility is often thought of as a taboo word for many these days, but Blizzard manages it extremely well – diluting everything down to a core set of mechanics that can appeal to everyone with as little friction as possible. Look at *World Of Warcraft*, *Hearthstone* and now *Heroes Of The Storm*. Having played the alpha for quite some time now, it's obvious Blizzard is looking to remove all the barriers to entry that the MOBA genre has; the genre is notorious for seemingly being impossible to learn for newcomers, after all. What that means is no creep score, no traditional jungling, no rune pages and masteries, no item builds and no Teemo.

If you've not played a MOBA before then all that will have likely flown over your head – and that's kind of the point. Blizzard has instead created a multiplayer game designed around a very core set of mechanics that doesn't require learning a metagame or memorising statistics and items. It's just you, your favourite *Warcraft*, *Starcraft* or *Diablo* character and a handful of others. It still plays like a MOBA – which is to say you have lanes and minions to destroy with a unique character – but with a quicker pace. In fact, it's the aggression that feels most pointed about *Heroes Of The Storm*, and the lack of a personal gold store for items is likely the reason for that. The risk of death is negated; you might have to sit around for a handful of seconds if you fail to take the advantage, but your opponents won't gain extra resources as a result.

There's a risk that some of the depth of the genre might have been stripped back in favour of this approach, and yes it is true that a large part of the MOBA genre has been about the strategy that comes with purchasing certain items – either offensively or defensively to counter your opposition. But *Heroes Of The Storm* has an ace up its sleeve: its varied selection of maps. Each of the four maps (currently available) play very differently to one another, and while they do still feature certain genre staples – such as towers, bases and minions – their differing objectives always give you a key objective to fight over. Maybe it'll galvanise your team into action, or focus combat in a very particular spot or maybe you'll need to work together to ensure the map is covered – either way, it brings that bit extra to think about outside of the just the combat. *Heroes Of The Storm* is still in alpha, so things could change quite dramatically, but it's looking very promising right now.

■ Below: Learning each of the maps doesn't take long, so it's easy to figure out strategies with your team.



"Heroes Of The Storm is a different take on the genre. We're trying to have fast-paced games, we're trying to have team-oriented games"
ALAN DABIRI, BLIZZARD

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: US
Publisher: Blizzard
Developer: In-house
Release: TBA
Genre: MOBA
Players: 1-10

Developer Profile

Blizzard has long been known for the quality of its releases, but primarily the developer is known for *World Of Warcraft* – which for nearly a decade had remained the brunt of its focus. These days Blizzard is trying a lot more, but that overarching quality doesn't seem to waiver.

Developer History

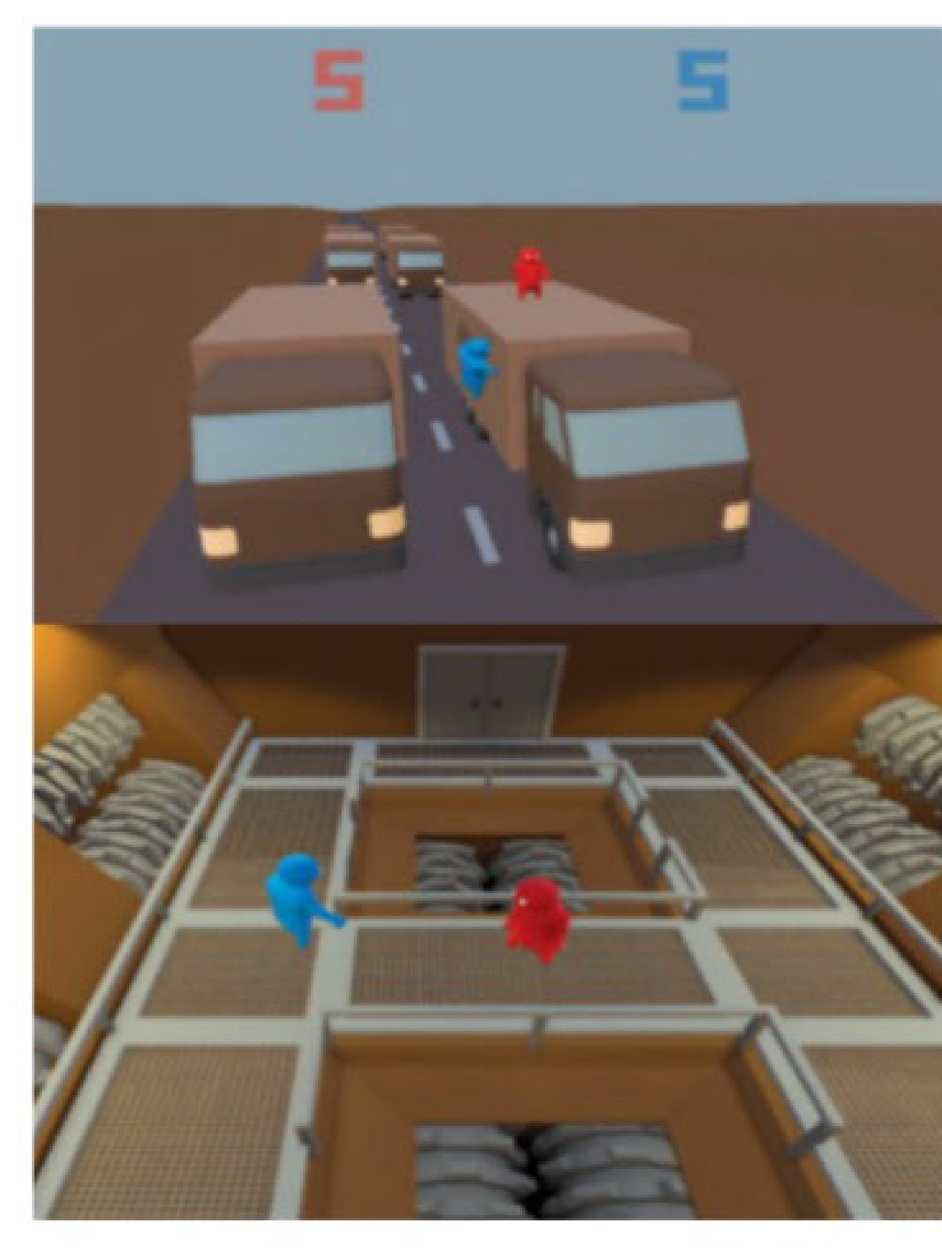
Hearthstone: Heroes Of Warcraft **2014 [PC]**
World Of Warcraft **2004 [PC]**
Diablo **1996 [PC]**
Warcraft: Orcs & Humans **1994 [PC]**

High Point

Picking a high point for such an esteemed developer is always going to be hard, but *World Of Warcraft* remains one of the most influential videogames of all time – and continues to draw millions of players a month.



"It has been brilliantly described as a drunken Jelly Baby boxing simulator, and that's fairly accurate"



Our personal favourite stage is Grind: a compact stage surrounded by swirling meat-grinders that players have to throw each other into.

Gang Beasts

CONCEPT A bunch of doughy fighters with poor balance and worse physics duke it out across a range of outlandish backdrops.

It's the Pillsbury Doughboy vs. Morph!

We'll admit that *Gang Beasts* doesn't lend itself very well to a scattering of screenshots. As you can see, it looks like Morph has escaped Tony Hart's brush drawer, got drunk with a bunch of his clay-mates and started his own fight club. However, the odd truth is that Boneloaf's humble brawler (which is still in alpha) has taken the indie circuit by surprise and is being touted as the breakout multiplayer game of the year.

Gang Beasts ably fills the void of addictive in-development multiplayer game that Nidhogg has left vacant since it was released a few months ago, and similarly it hooks its enjoyment on a few simple mechanics. It has been brilliantly described as a drunken Jelly Baby boxing simulator, and that's fairly accurate: four people wobble around arenas planted with various traps, duking it out until one last man (doughy-thing) is left standing.

You're given a few simple inputs: your arms are assigned to two separate buttons, tapping which will unleash a punch while holding each down will grab objects and enemies. You're also able to jump and lift your arms up in celebration. There's a slapstick veneer to the whole experience, and while there's plenty of flailing and amusing inaccuracy to the way the amorphous blogs stagger about attacking one another, there's also enough skill to its design to make you feel in control of the action. There's tactic in working out how to get the better of other players, waiting until they're at a decent height to make it easier to pummel and then throw their limp body into a twirling meat grinder.

The environments themselves also feed into the chaotic, unpredictable nature of the fighting itself. A destructible window-cleaning gondola offers little room for manoeuvre, while a battle on top of two moving trucks is almost impossible to survive. Yet, there's little frustration in losing a match. The sheer hilarity of seeing these colourful creatures awkwardly punching one another, tumbling over the environment and clinging for dear life is as fun to watch as it is to play, rewarding both in victory and in death.

The developer promises that further updates are on the way, and we're sure that there will be many more tweaks and additions before the game receives a full release later in the year. Until then the game is available to download in its alpha state for free from the developer's website, and we implore you to do just that.



There's something quite tragic about the way players can cling onto each other in the vein hope to avoid death. It's part of what makes the game so hilarious to watch.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: UK/US
Publisher: Boneloaf
Developer: In-house
Release: Out now (Alpha)
Genre: Beat-'Em-Up
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

A small indie game studio with its members scattered across the UK (and one in the US), the group was formed by three brothers – James Brown, Jonathan Brown and Michael Brown. To date it has focused its efforts on creating offbeat fighting games inspired by Capcom's *Final Fight* games, Sega's *Streets of Rage* and *Golden Axe* series to name but a few.

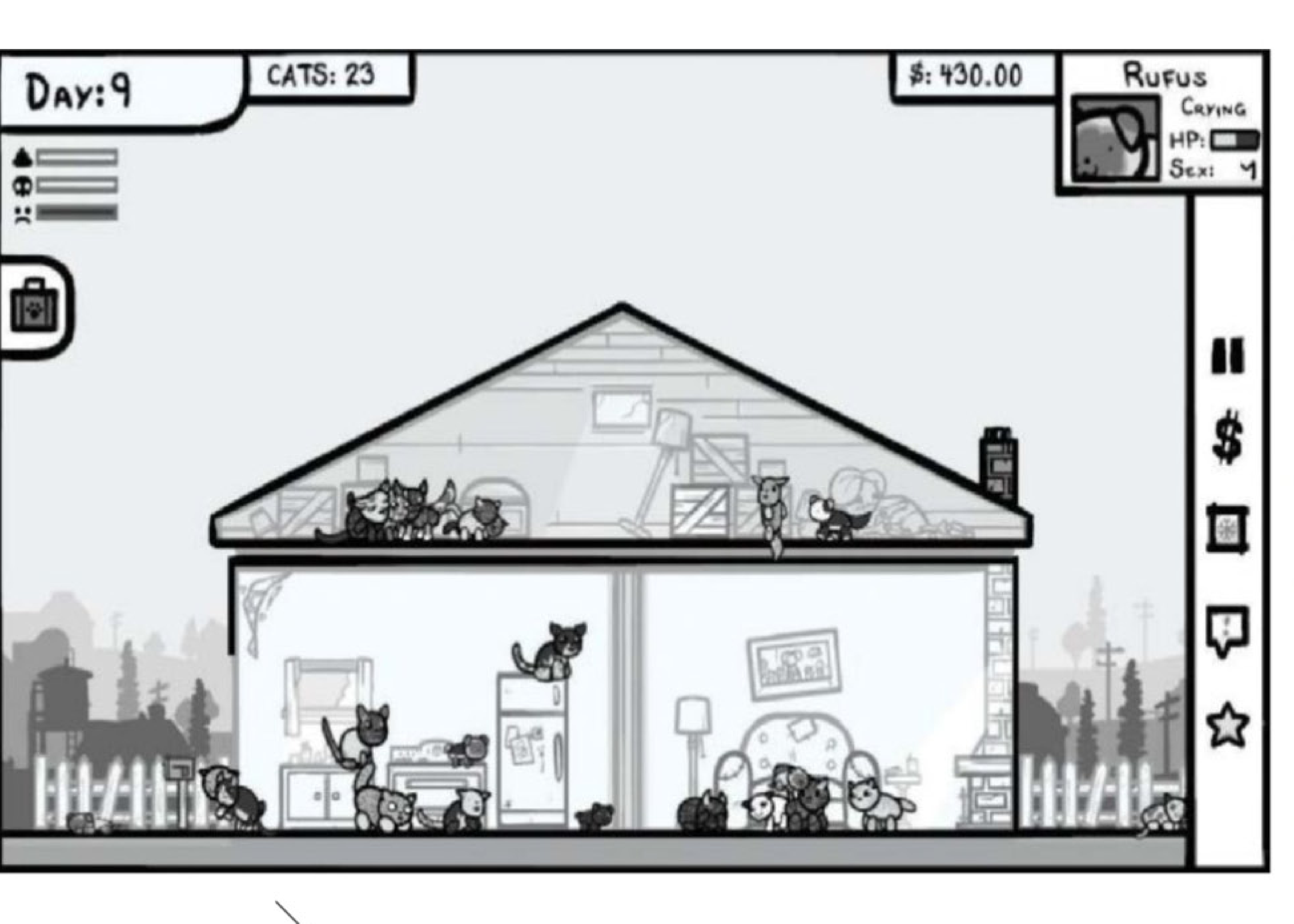
Developer History

Gang Beasts **2014 [PC]**
Grim Beasts **2013 [PC]**

High Point

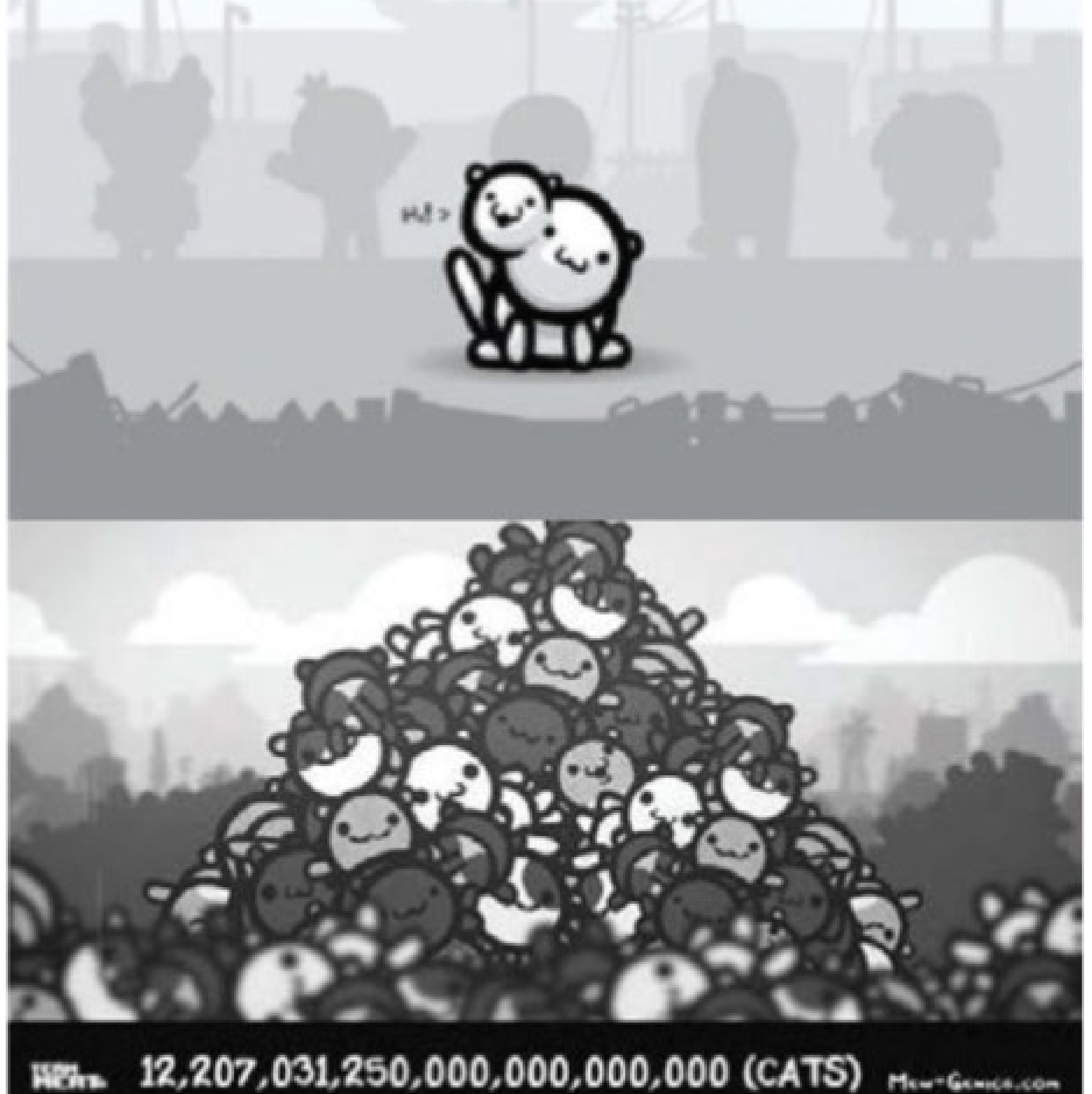
While it hasn't even got the game out the door yet, *Gang Beasts* has already gained notable recognition across trade shows. It's great fun to play.





■ Left: Over time, your house will fill up with your cats. They don't only appear from mating; straggler cats are coaxed to your lair, assumedly by the smell of other cats' pheromones.
■ Below: It seems that there won't only be breeding at play in *Mew-Genics!*, there'll also be fighting.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: iOS, PC
Origin: America
Publisher: Team Meat
Developer: In-house
Release: 2014
Genre: Crazy Cat Lady Sim
Players: TBA

Developer Profile

Team Meat – the creative force consisting of Edmund McMillen and Tommy Refenes – has a very distinct visual style that is reminiscent of ye olde browser Flash games, popular in the early Noughties. Typically dark and unsettling, Team Meat's games always hit upon something innovative, and master the genres they operate within.

Developer History

Super Meat Boy
2010 [Xbox 360, PC, Mac]

High Point

Super Meat Boy has easily been the best platformer we've played in the last few years – a mixture of devilishly difficult and unique, *Super Meat Boy* took the action-platformer to its logical conclusion.

Mew-Genics!

CONCEPT ■ Ever wanted to be a crazy cat lady? Well, now you can – with the brains and creative team behind *Super Meat Boy*'s newest and craziest project to date.

Pussies galore

Imagine you've got two cats – let's call them Manchester and Dr. Butts (because that's what the game's creator, Edmund McMillen, suggests you call them). Dr. Butts, the female cat of your lovely feline couple, is pregnant. She gives birth, and you notice that the litter of kittens have their father's shaped head, body and legs, but their mother's markings. One kitten in particular has the 'perfect' inheritance of his mother's texture – spotted across his back, tail, legs and head. This kitten will be the perfect entrant for various pageants.

The game is going to be a mix of *Pokémon* and *The Sims*, it seems – which is an excellent way to get us interested already – the breeding mechanic explained above is the crux around which the whole thing operates, augmented by the task of keeping the various cats alive. McMillen is including a wide variety of diseases, illnesses and unpleasantries in the game, each of which you'll have to deal with if you want your litter of kittens to survive past puberty. The offspring of Manchester and Dr. Butts won't retain the same stats they were born with – as they grow up they'll alter and change. By the time they've reached adulthood, they might be utterly useless – puberty might render them ugly, mewling idiots, crippled by narcolepsy (which *can* happen) or they might become violently inclined, biting anyone or anything that comes near them.

There won't just be your kittens and cats to look after, either – the game will operate in real time, with different characters and events cropping up at different times of the week. Side characters, little quests, mysterious letters that appear under your door – you can only access them if you're playing the game at certain times of the day (or night). This mechanic reminds us of the Lapras that would only turn up on Friday evenings in *Pokémon Gold/Silver/Crystal* – and it's the kind of involving conceit that will keep us coming back for more (which is an important facet of iOS gaming that really can't be overlooked when there's so much competition around). The pseudo-sandbox, collect-em-all nature of the game seems to be built specifically to keep players involved in the mad, monochrome world *Mew-Genics!* has built.

We're not sure if it's going to have the same 'just one more go' qualities that *The Binding Of Isaac* or *Super Meat Boy* did, but hopefully it's designed with a more languid pace – a slow burner that's going to occupy that empty mindspace that magically grows from boredom the second you put your iPad or iPhone down. Of course, the game's also releasing on Steam, too – so it might even end up being that little 'calm down' experience you need that bookends either side of a heavy sit-down with *FTL* or *PlanetSide*.

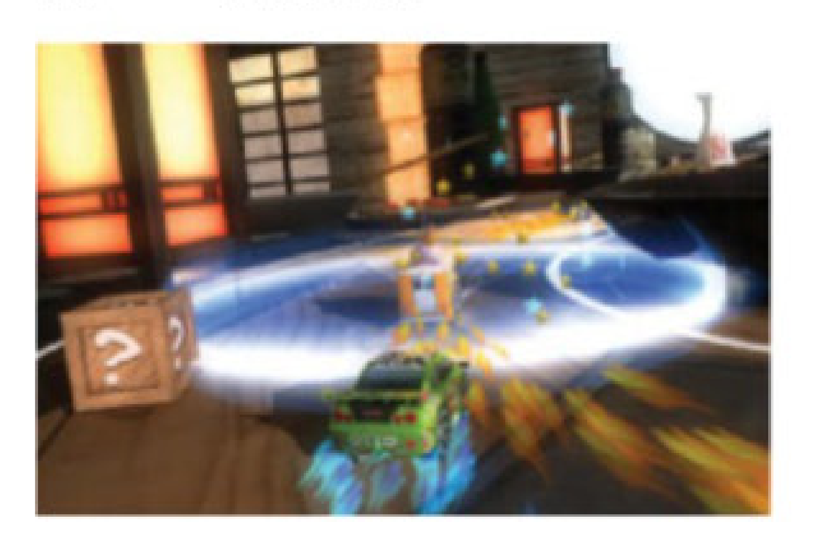
> "You aren't the only hoarder in Mew-Genics, in fact almost everyone in Boone county seems to be just about as mentally broken as you and I!"
>
> EDMUND MCMILLEN, ARTIST, CO-CEO TEAM MEAT

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

TABLE TOP RACING

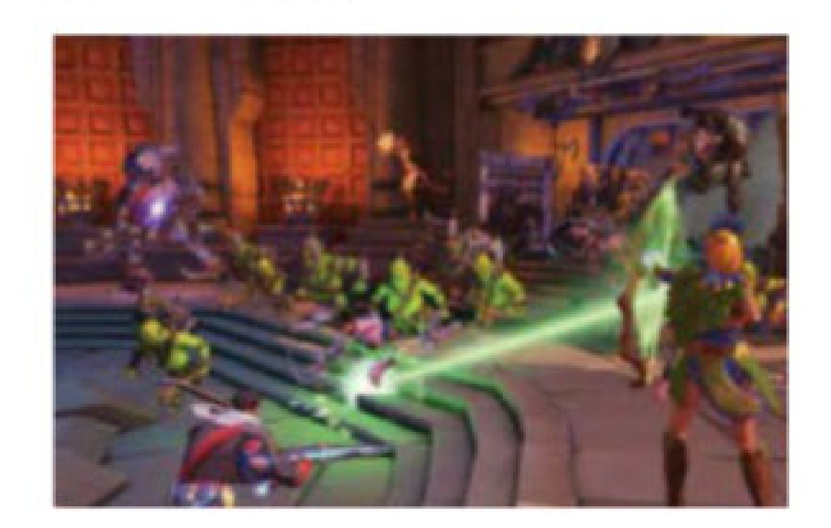
Format: PS Vita
Publisher: Ripstone
Developer: Playrise
ETA: Summer 2014



THIS *MICRO Machines*-style racer first debuted on iOS and Android earlier in the year (raking up an impressive 3.7m downloads) and developer Playrise has seen fit to bring the title to PS Vita, updating controls and visuals for the system. In action, the game is slick on the track and boasts a wealth of features and modes that justify its console release. It's not the most polished racer on the system but it's an entertaining throwback.

ORCS MUST DIE! UNCHAINED

Format: PC
Publisher: Robot Entertainment
Developer: In-house
ETA: Late 2014



THE LATEST entry in the series gets on-trend with the long line of franchises making the transition into MOBA and CCG. The sequel blends the two, while lifting existing gameplay mechanics and elements from the third-person action title. It pits two teams against each other, armed with the weapons and abilities synonymous with the series. This has stretched itself beyond the template for the free-to-play sequel.

RECORD RUN

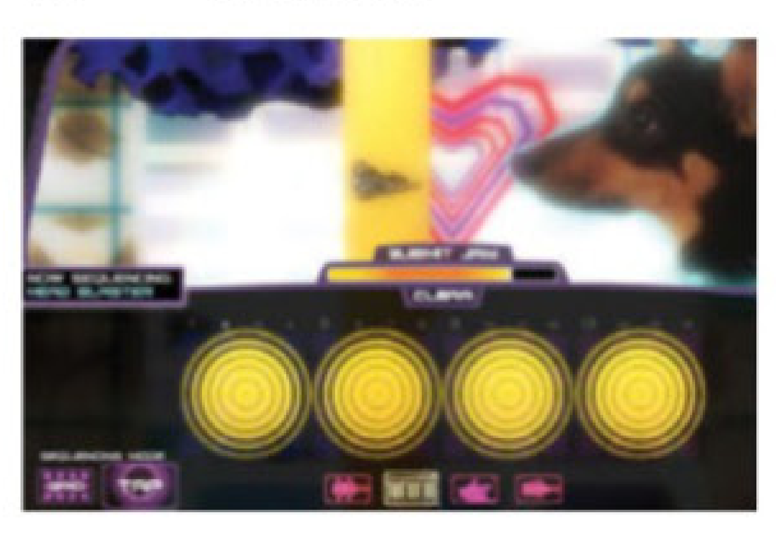
Format: iOS
Publisher: Harmonix
Developer: In-house
ETA: Summer 2014



GUITAR HERO studio Harmonix has announced its second foray into mobile; a more straightforward endless runner that, unsurprisingly, has a musical twist. Announced at PAX East by studio head Alex Rigopulos, *Record Run* is a free-to-play title that integrates users' music libraries into the game, creating levels constructed with your own tunes. It's a premise that has the potential to create a more engaging take on the staid auto-running model.

COSMIC DJ

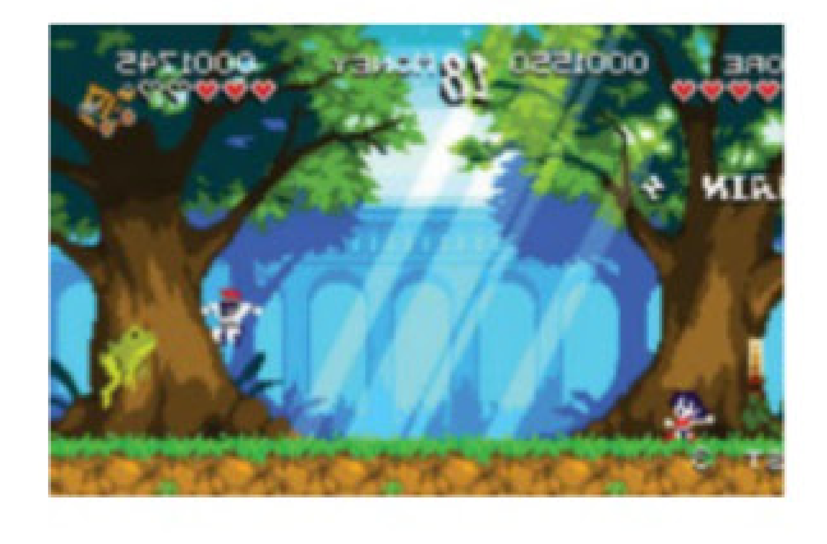
Format: PC, iOS
Publisher: Devolver Digital
Developer: GL33k
ETA: Summer 2014



COSMIC DJ is a combination of videogame and interactive music tool, enabling players to make music while completing a series of objectives. The trailer is a barrage of bright imagery, people waving their hands, flying babies and a forlorn-looking canine – it's the sort of horrific montage that makes you feel too old to comprehend its appeal. Still, it is *meant* to have a quirky appeal and it promises to be accessible for non-music types.

CURSES 'N CHAOS

Format: PC, PS Vita
Publisher: Tribute Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: Late 2014



TRIBUTE GAMES has announced *Curses 'N Chaos* – a wave-based arcade action game in which players are tasked with fending off ghosts and goblins. Choose between a lightly armoured knight and a martial artist – both of which have been cursed with an affliction that draws monsters to them, their mission being to break said spell. You're given a time limit to clear the screen before the grim reaper arrives.

NINJA SENKI DX

Format: PC, PS Vita
Publisher: Tribute Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: Late 2014



AN UPDATE of the popular free platformer that Tribute Games first released way back in 2010, this *DX* version will bring with it some graphical refinements, as well as some new gameplay features to make it more of a comprehensive console release. It's welcome news, given that the original was a delightful fast-paced platformer and its console version should hopefully bring it some overdue wider recognition.

BELOW

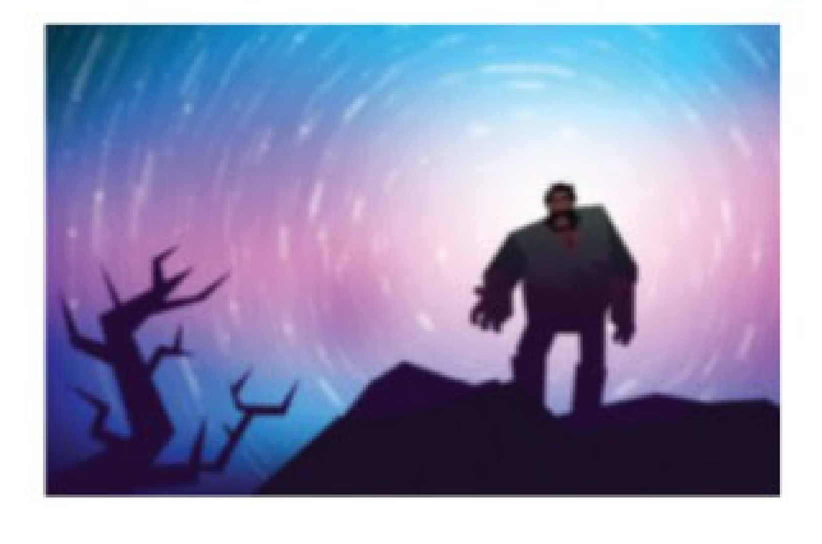
Format: Xbox One
Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Capybara
ETA: 2014



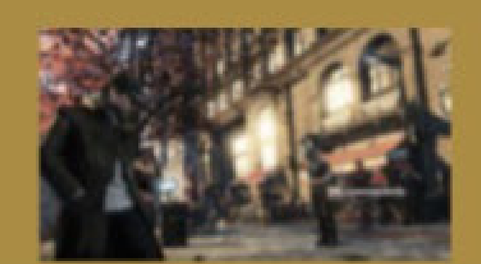
NOT MUCH has been said since Capybara announced *Below*, but the developer has recently been showing off the game in action. It's an expansive open-world that drops players into the depths of its labyrinth design and leaves them to carve their own path. The studio cites the opaque nature of *Dark Souls* as a major influence and it looks like this top-down epic will deliver a similarly beguiling adventure.

SEVERED

Format: iOS
Publisher: Drinkbox Studios
Developer: In-house
ETA: Spring 2015

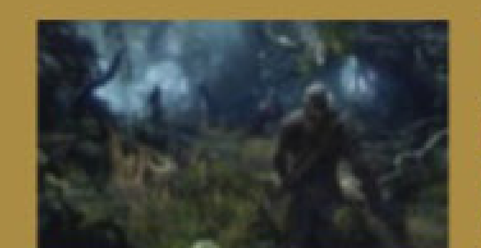


THE STUDIO best known for *Guacamelee!* has announced its next project, *Severed*. Not due until 2015, this first-person adventure has you assume the role of a heroine who awakens to find part of her arm missing. Matching the studio's inimitable art style with *Infinity Blade*-style mechanics, players will use gesture-based controls to battle different creatures, severing enemy body parts and attaching them to gain new powers.



DELAYED –Watch Dogs (Wii U)

Ubisoft has been one of the few third-party publishers to continue supporting Nintendo's new console, but it's not doing the Wii U any favours with its plans to launch *Watch Dogs* on the system at the tail-end of 2014.



DELAYED – The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt (Multi)

CD Projekt RED has formally announced that it will delay its upcoming *The Witcher* sequel until February 2015. In an open letter, the studio stated that the delay would help the game reach a higher level of quality.

ALPHA MUSE

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Current Circus**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2014**



IN WHAT looks like a cross between *Rez* and *Spore*, developer Current Circus has created an intriguing looking rhythm game. Players will create musical compilations by steering a glowing orb through a pathway, interacting with the environment and other objects as they pass through what appears to be a kaleidoscopic electric ocean. There's a fascinating interplay between the imagery and music here that should appeal.

THE LAST GUARDIAN

Format: **PlayStation 3**
Publisher: **Sony**
Developer: **Team ICO**
ETA: **TBC 2014**



WHILE MOST suspected that Sony had shelved Team ICO's *The Last Guardian* long ago, one of the company's bigwigs has confirmed the game is still in development and will see the light of day. Due to the amount of attention the game has received over the last few years, Sony is making sure that it delivers on the high expectations, but was reticent to add more details on when it's likely to arrive and whether it has made the jump from PS3 to PS4.

CITIZENS OF EARTH

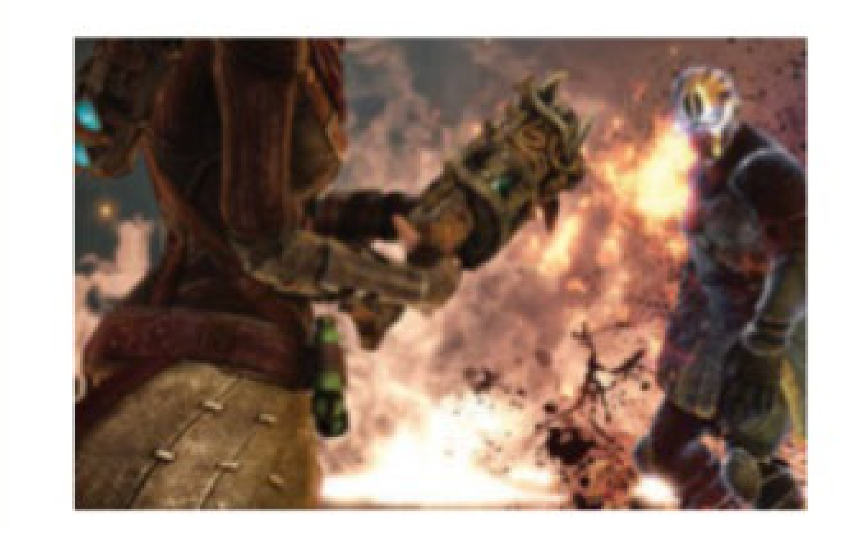
Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Atlus**
Developer: **Eden Industries**
ETA: **2014**



AFTER FAILING to raise adequate funds at the end of last year on Kickstarter, Atlus has rescued developer Eden Industries' latest project, *Citizens Of Earth*. The Sega-owned publisher has fit the bill for the $100k goal the studio missed for its *Earthbound*-esque turn-based RPG, which involves the player being the Vice President of the World, who is charged with recruiting 40 citizens to help battle the chaos of the world.

NOSGOTH

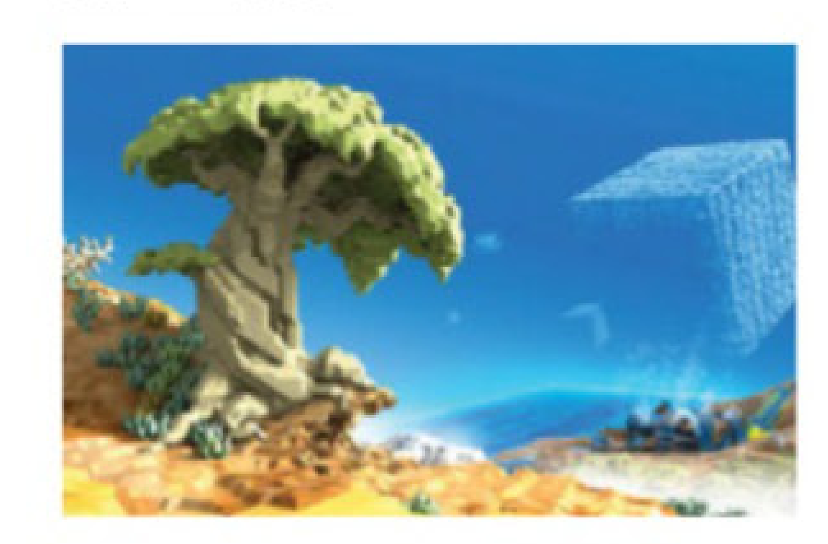
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Square Enix**
Developer: **Psyonix**
ETA: **TBC 2014**



NOSGOTH WASN'T exactly what many people expected from the resurrection of the moribund *Legacy Of Kain* franchise – and aside from a few shared design aspects it has seemingly little in common with its predecessor. Nevertheless, the free-to-play online team deathmatch title has plenty of merit in its own right, with its human and vampire classes being distinctive enough to make the action feel unique.

PLANETS3

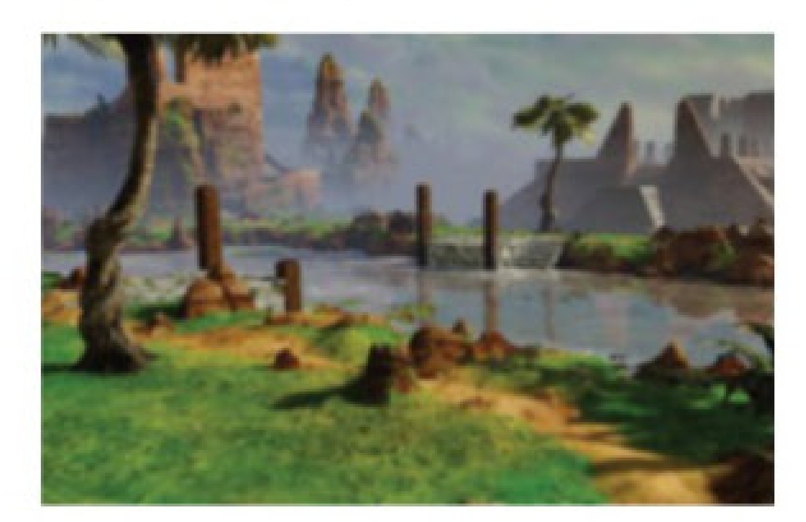
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Cubical Drift**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



QUITE CONSIDERABLY influenced by the work of one Markus Persson, this Kickstarter success story offers players access to a 3D open-world voxel-based role-playing game, that offers a huge amount of creative freedom alongside a series of mysteries that underpin each new world. Players can create their own vehicles, weapons and character type, before venturing off around the beautifully rendered landscapes.

OUTCAST

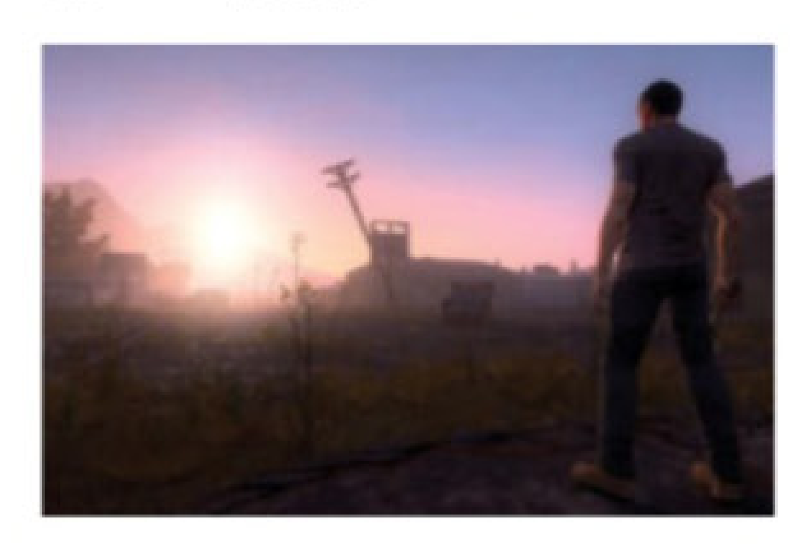
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Fresh3D**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2015**



COMPRISED OF various members of the original development team of *Outcast*, Fresh3D has taken the path well trodden and used Kickstarter to fund a remake of the brand. The pitch is to completely recreate the entire game for a new audience, with the intention of revitalising interest and spawning a profitable franchise. The original was well-received for its time, but are there enough fans willing to invest?

H1Z1

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Sony**
Developer: **Sony Online Entertainment**
ETA: **TBC 2014**



SONY HAS been teasing its next big project – a zombie survival game that draws obvious comparisons to *DayZ*. SOE is touting *H1Z1*'s immense level of customisation as its main selling point, while also pimping its proprietary next-gen engine, Forgelight. Other features include a world persistent across multiple servers and different rule sets, enabling a rich level of interaction between human allies and enemies.

UNTITLED STAR WARS PROJECT

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **EA**
Developer: **Visceral Games**
ETA: **TBC 2015**



EA HAS invested a considerable amount in securing the *Star Wars* licence and it's taking adapting the property seriously, roping in some impressive talent to work on various projects. We know that DICE has been working on a *Battlefront* sequel, but recently it was confirmed that Naughty Dog's Amy Hennig had joined EA's Visceral Studios to work on a unannounced Star Wars game.


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3



WHY I ❤...

Smuggler's Run

AHMED BOUKHELIFA, IVORY TOWER COO [THE CREW]

Smuggler's Run was one of the key influences for design in Test Drive Unlimited – I remember this mission where you have to chase a car, and it was during a flood, and you had this mechanic that altered your speed depending if you were driving on rock, grass, the street or whatever. And it was really finely tuned, so you had to keep altering your speed and even then sometimes you'd just lose control of your car. You could do it a dozen times and it would play differently. At the time, it was the pinnacle of open-world driving; it was a videogame ahead of its time.

"At the time, it was the pinnacle of open-world driving; it was a videogame ahead of its time"

AHMED BOUKHELIFA, IVORY TOWER COO [THE CREW]



A NEW DAWN

MASSIVE ENTERTAINMENT HAS BEEN QUIET ON THE DIVISION SINCE IT BLEW OUR MINDS AT E3 NEARLY A YEAR AGO. NOW AS IT READIES TO UNVEIL THE FULL SCOPE OF ITS POST-APOCALYPTIC RPG, THE STUDIO REVEALS WHY THE SNOWDROP ENGINE MAKES FOR THE MOST ADVANCED NEXT-GEN EXPERIENCE TODAY

Ubisoft is a publisher that relishes gambling its fortunes and, despite having in possession some of the most lucrative videogame brands in history, it hasn't always proven to be a strategy that has worked in the company's favour. But ignoring its misguided investment in Nintendo's Wii U and failed attempts to reinvent past franchises, Ubisoft has garnered almost a maverick reputation in recent years. Take, for example, the company's attitude to E3. It bounds onto the stage each year, armed with cheerful enthusiasm and a few embarrassing pratfalls and yet somehow manages to strut off with the audience in its pocket, stealing the show right out from under EA, or even Sony and Microsoft's noses.

There's no big secret to how it manages to garner such excitement year-on-year. It's the company's commitment to innovation, promising to deliver new gameplay experience that drive ambitious design conceits back into the heart of console gaming. It's a tradition that continued at last year's show, when Massive Entertainment took to the stage to present *The Division*.

"I wouldn't say we're breaking the mould," demurs Massive Entertainment's Ryan Bernard, the game's director. "For me, personally, this is my fourth large project and they do tend to follow a similar cycle. There's a grandiose plan that begins to get more focused and honed down and improved better and better. This has followed the same process. You want to create the best experience for the largest audience you can." In the case of *The Division*, much of what makes its plan grandiose is still being kept closely under wraps (what with secrecy being another key component in Ubisoft's winning E3 strategy) but it's clear that the game is not just another template techno-thriller courtesy of the Tom Clancy brand.

"The universe itself we're creating is huge," elaborates Bernard when discussing the core themes of the game. "We've got a mid-crisis situation in the near-future, modernised New York. Creating a situation with a virus where society is crumbling. It's not stopping a terrorist or nuclear attack, it's right in the midst of a situation, which is new in a game environment we believe. What we needed with the division itself was to find a new Clancy unit that fit the spectrum and was unique, which I believe we've done with the more civilianised soldiers embedded in society after training, only responding to domestic catastrophes like the scenario in our game.

"But the biggest thing was creating a persistent RPG online game in the Clancy universe," continues Bernard. "Meshing those two universes together has been challenging and »


SHD

One innovation that Massive is particularly proud to showcase is the implementation of the UI layered above the game world. The studio states that it's an incredibly enhanced feature that adds to the overall player immersion that it is targeting.

fun, and I think extremely rewarding." Key to achieving the studio's ambitious vision for the title would be its bespoke engine, Snowdrop, which was created from the ground-up for the game itself. But, as it would prove, concurrently developing one of the most advanced next-gen engines in the industry and one of the most eagerly-anticipated triple-a titles of the year is a monumental task.

Despite the name Massive, the outfit is more intimate that you might expect. When it began working on *The Division*, the studio understood that it would be an immense task for a large-scale studio, let alone one that consists of a couple of hundred employees and based in the relatively obscure region of Malmö in Sweden. "There wasn't an engine out there that could do the things we were imagining for *The Division*," states brand art director Rodrigo Cortes. "Ubisoft has a lot of engines that are very capable for current-gen but when we started out we had next-gen in mind and we wanted to be prepared for new consoles from the beginning. The reality is that you need to have a very ambitious or very big game connected to the technology. It's almost impossible to create an engine without a game connected to it. All the content that needs to go in needs to be coupled with the technology. We wanted an engine that could do exactly what we needed to do to and have it build this game where we were innovating in several areas."

It's worth commenting on the fact that up until a year ago, Massive was a relatively unknown quantity in the industry. It's last game credit was 2007's acclaimed Cold War strategy game, *World In Conflict*. It was acquired a year later by Ubisoft and subsequently lent its expertise across the development of the publisher's *Assassin's Creed* and *Far Cry* titles. But the Malmö outfit's first major venture is every bit the confident, sprawling and downright ambitious venture than any other Ubisoft product currently loaded in the company's release barrel.

First tall order on its checklist was crafting an engine that would be geared towards the next generation of console hardware. "We were working towards an unspecified target platform," says Cortes. "We made some guesses on what the next-gen architecture would be. We were lucky. We built the engine for heavy multithreading, huge amounts of memory, online productivity, performable graphics and 64-bit, which is quite big; most engines right now are 32-bit and upscaled. Our engine was built from the ground up. All of those things made it hard to know where we would end up." Luckily, the results fell closely in line with Sony and Microsoft's new platforms, which only bolstered the studio's confidence. "It was really good to end up in that situation where all of a sudden we're more capable and have the best next-gen engine out there," enthuses Cortes.It also made the prospect of *The Division*'s concept land squarely among the zeitgeist of MMOs-by-any-other-name alongside Bungie's *Destiny*. But while Bungie boasts more than double the number of employees, Massive doesn't have the luxury of such an extensive workforce and thus had to build an engine that would deliver a triple-A next-gen gaming experience efficiently.

"The philosophy of Snowdrop is not doing the best graphics or the best animation but is about something very simple: creating more with less," says Cortes. "It's open-ended in how we do the node-based system, which empowers the content creators. It comes a little bit from the constraints of Malmö, a small city in Sweden, where we can't attract the type of talent or huge teams, so we needed to do an engine that fit the way Massive does games. That gives a lot of freedom to the content creators and can compete with the best without having to have







"IT'S UNLIKE ANYTHING ANY OTHER GAME CAN DO OR HAS DONE BEFORE"

a huge team. It's more about the core way of doing games at Massive and that transfers to the way we do technology."

We're given a whistle-stop tour of an example where principle has been put into practice to stunning results. If you watch the E3 debut footage, destruction plays a crucial role in grounding the action in reality occurring on a more granular level. So, whereas structures and vehicles in most games have the propensity to explode in plumes of smoke and flames after absorbing a few bullets, the same doesn't occur here. Instead damage and destruction transpires in a more organic fashion – windows will shatter, materials crumble in different physical forms and everything is calculated in real-time.

"Because of the way the [engine] is built being so open and so powerful, we asked two guys 'Can you do destruction?' and they came back with the most advanced destruction out there in the industry right now," beams Cortes. It wasn't because the engine itself was purpose-built, but it's the workflow and the way it's done. And it goes back to immersion; we want to immerse the player. We always start with that. Lighting is one of the key immersive factors, we want to have real-time realistic illumination because of the day/night cycle, but at the same time we have all the dynamic light, balancing and reacting in real-time. Once again, we have one of the most advanced lighting engines. Everything, the UI, network code, everything is based on this very simple idea is that we need to build more with less."

Bernard interjects: "What was unique about the experience for me was we were able to, as a creative developer, say that we want to do this, or use this type of animation or this type of realism and because of the way Snowdrop has been developed we've pretty much been able to do what we want and figure out how to make that happen," he says. "It has been built from the ground-up with *The Division* in mind – as an online progressive game that can handle players to connect seamlessly, to showcase graphics, showcase destruction. We are creating a New York that is the most immersive, more realistic, more frightening environment for our players as a gameplay space that would be challenging on any engine and Snowdrop has made that amazingly possible in bringing that to life."

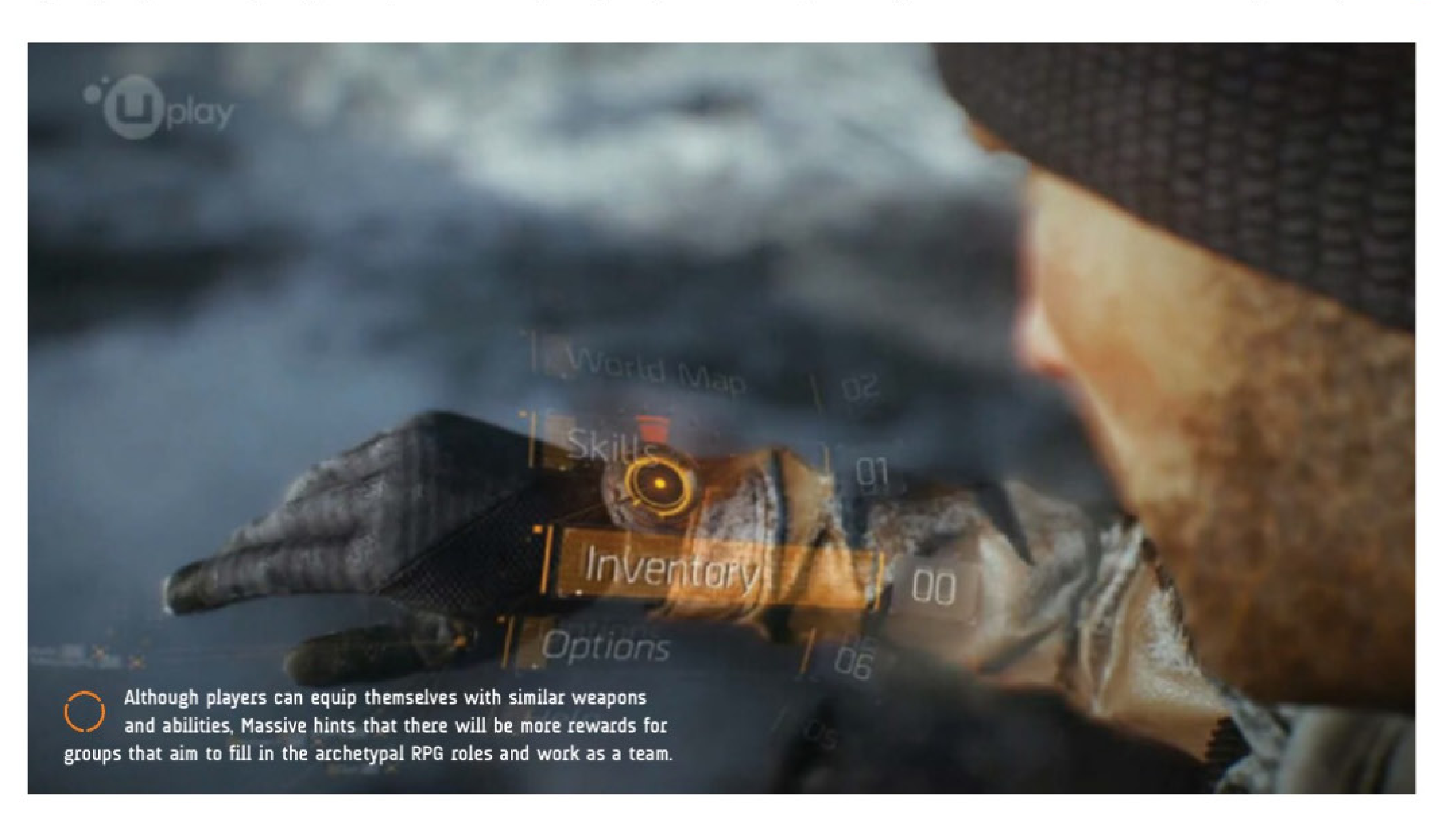
This is where the engine excelled in enabling the studio to both create a realistic proxy of New York City without spending hundreds of hours slavishly pouring over every brick and sidewalk crack.

"It's down to the procedural content creation," explains Cortes, discussing how the Snowdrop Engine enabled Massive to effectively and efficiently realise the city without compromising detail. "It's hard to realise how big that city is »

FLYING HIGH

Inside The Division's ground-breaking companion app

One of the most impressive features announced during the unveiling of *The Division* was the use of second-screen technology. "Industry-wide, going into cross-platform gaming is really important," game director Ryan Bernard tells us. "We wanted to create for *The Division* a companion client that was meaningful." Rather than just a stats screen or an online chat room, *The Division*'s companion app enables a fifth player to join a squad and provide support from an aerial attack drone. "We set out with a very lofty goal for our companion team in creating a real-time simultaneous group member that has progression, that has skills, that can enhance the gameplay," he continues. "And we're going to hit it."



Although players can equip themselves with similar weapons and abilities, Massive hints that there will be more rewards for groups that aim to fill in the archetypal RPG roles and work as a team.



"THE FOUNDATION OF THE GAME IS THAT THE WORLD HAS TO BE LOGICAL"



The entirety of New York will be open to the player from the start. However, there are areas to avoid until you're capable of tackling them.

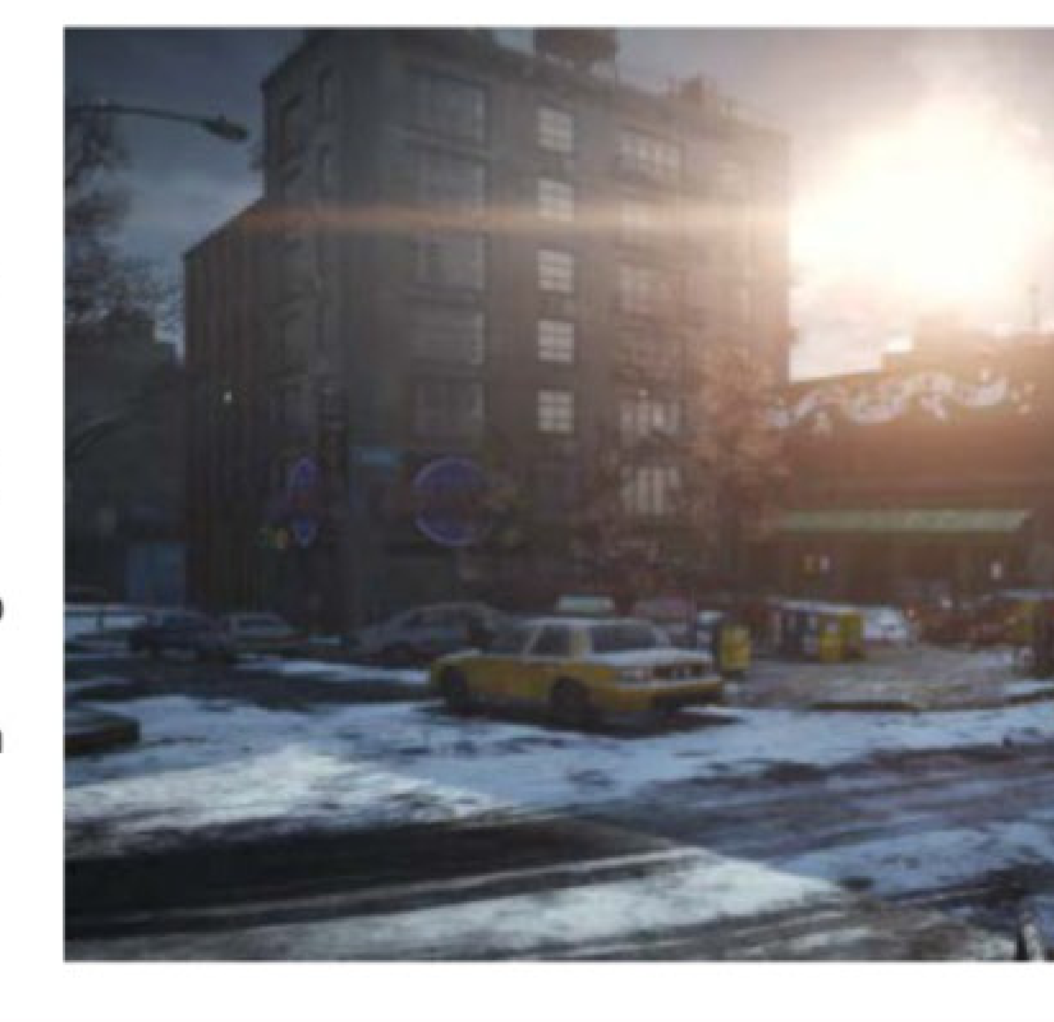
until you've been there, counting the streets and the amount of detail and, again, we're not that super huge team to build it, so we had to come up with a lot of smart ways to approach it. So we came up with the procedural creation of buildings, so you just setup a scale of 'this is how big the building is going to be, this is the type of building, this is how many floors' and then you have a building. There was a lot of work behind that but when we started populating the whole world that was the biggest advancement, allowing us to build a lot of complicated, high-quality, highly-detailed buildings with a lot of variety."

The result is a city that is more alive than its barren streets would have you believe. From a technical perspective, the bleeding-edge engine design at Massive's fingertips has conjured a world that unfolds in front of the player from the moment they step inside it. This creates a sprawling open world, with routes and objectives that can be outlined on the in-game map (projected onto the ground from your protagonist's watch) and there's both PvP and PvE options for players to embark on. But before we delve into some of the gameplay features, it's clear that fundamental to making the scenario engaging was making the world itself believable. From the dynamic weather systems that can impact the way you approach a mission, to the abilities and skills used in combat, every aspect of design had to be grounded in reality.

"The foundation of the game, and I think this is something that is not only Massive but Ubisoft wide, is that the world of the game has to be logical," says Bernard. "We're creating a scenario, a new universe, a new situation that's extremely intense. To be believable and to support the logic and how we build the world has to make sense. It takes place a month after black Friday and the collapse is in full steam but this is still New York City. This is still the decline of our universe and things are still relevant and make sense. I think from a realism standpoint it's about making sure things are logical and reasonable. It helps immerse the player, you're not pulled away by a giant dragon flying through the street."

There are definitely no dragons to report of from what we've seen but you'd be forgiven for thinking that one would be capable of the desolation, disorder and despair that has devastated the streets of New York. Your task is to venture through the wreckage as part of a four-person team, gathering supplies, aiding citizens and battling other factions that might be battling over resources or turf.

As previously mentioned by Bernard, the focus is on RPG first, which means XP and ranking up are among essential features that bring a new twist on the Clancy formula. The balance was enabling the player enough freedom through modifiers and loadouts to offer empowerment and progression throughout the level curb. "It's about having a great synergy not only between the weapon classes, architects and skills but also between players in a group," says Bernard. "So we've been layering the experience with that in mind. Making sure guns feel good and that they're plausible and making sure they fit into the Clancy universe. We are a Clancy game, so weapons are important and a defining feature for your agent. Am I up close in the enemies face or am I taking people out more safely from a distance? Those are going to define your playstyle in the game and that comes down to the weapons you choose."

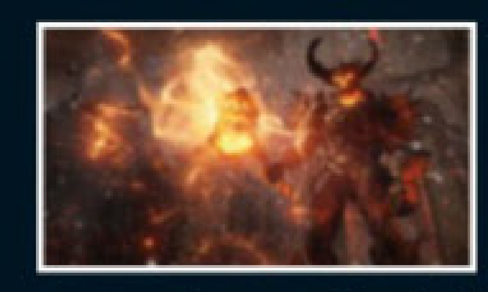


ENGINE ROOM

games™ guides you through the biggest next-gen engines currently in development

UNREAL ENGINE 4

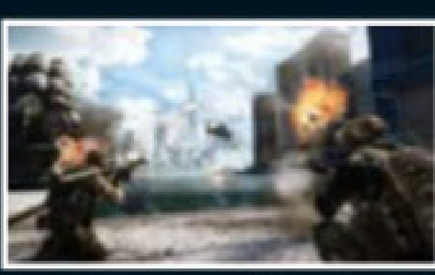
Developer: Epic Games



Epic hopes to replicate the fortunes of its previous Unreal Engine and offer companies an affordable and accessible option for developers to power their ideas. Of course, the company will also put it into practice itself, with a number of internal projects already scheduled to take advantage of its enhanced capabilities.

FROSTBITE 3 ENGINE

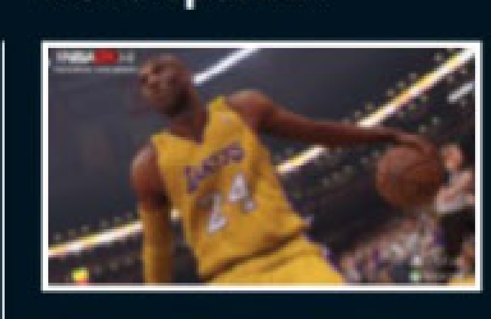
Developer: DICE



One of the few engines we've seen put into action, DICE's latest iteration on its bespoke engine features high texture detail and light/shadow complexity, and environmental deformation effects have been enhanced substantially. The AI is also now more advanced in replicating player behaviour.

ECO-MOTION ENGINE

Developer: 2K



This engine has been designed for sports games, specifically focusing on animations and emotional realism of in-game players. Players on court are no longer moving in pre-scripted ways, reacting dynamically to the events of the game. There's also a huge amount of depth in facial expression.



We ask whether that's the basis for the game's class system, or whether there's a more traditional online structure in place. "The goal for the game is we're classless," responds Bernard. "We want an open-ended system where you'll have a strong role in the group and a function. You're in an RPG and I believe that a multiplayer RPG where you play with friends, in a group or clan-mates is that it's important to feel useful and to have a role. So we have to create those roles through the weapon types and the skills in your loadout. The difference is we don't want to lock you into those choices like maybe a more traditional RPG has done in the past. It's a completely open system you can change on the fly. If you pick-up a new weapon type, it changes your playstyle – you can easily adapt and switch it out."

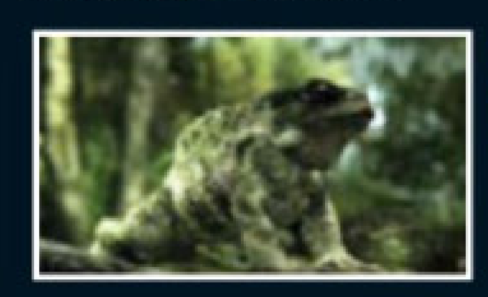
What then, if a group of players all opt for the same assault-centric weapon types. Will they have as much chance of successfully completing objectives as a more varied team match-up? "That's is a balance thing that we work on as we continue to develop the game," answers Bernard. "I think it's great to reward players for having that variety and create the best possible group let's say. We also want players to be able to all be assault, all be aggressive and have success in the game. There is potential content that you could do easier, and rewards if you take up different roles within the group."

It goes back to the trinity you find underpinning the majority of RPGs, with classic Tank, Healer and Ranged character classes. But given that it has that inimitable Clancy range-based combat, players flesh out their roles through advanced technology. "While not everything will have a foundation in logic it will be plausible and realistic," says Bernard. "We're making an RPG with progression and skills. The Clancy tech that the agents will use is important and where you draw the line in how far you push those and still remain plausible and fun. I wouldn't say it's a challenge but we're very aware of it. We don't push too far where it becomes sci-fi."

These skills come in many forms: from team-seeking health packs that enable the agent to deploy it from a distance, to a tennis ball-sized seeker mine – which avoids obstacles as it rolls towards the nearest enemy before detonating. Bernard highlights the Sentry as a particularly good example: "From what we've shown of the Sentry is that it is a physical real invention in the world that has a gameplay purpose," he says. "It drives attention at the enemies, it can deny cover, and do damage and it's believable. It's a skill and it has synergy with »

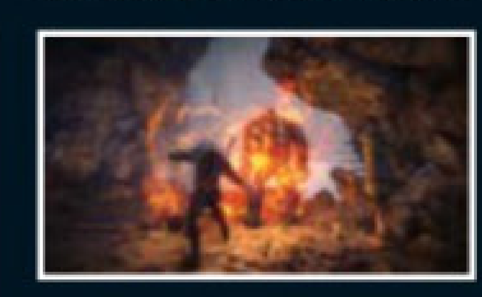


CRYENGINE 3
Developer: Crytek

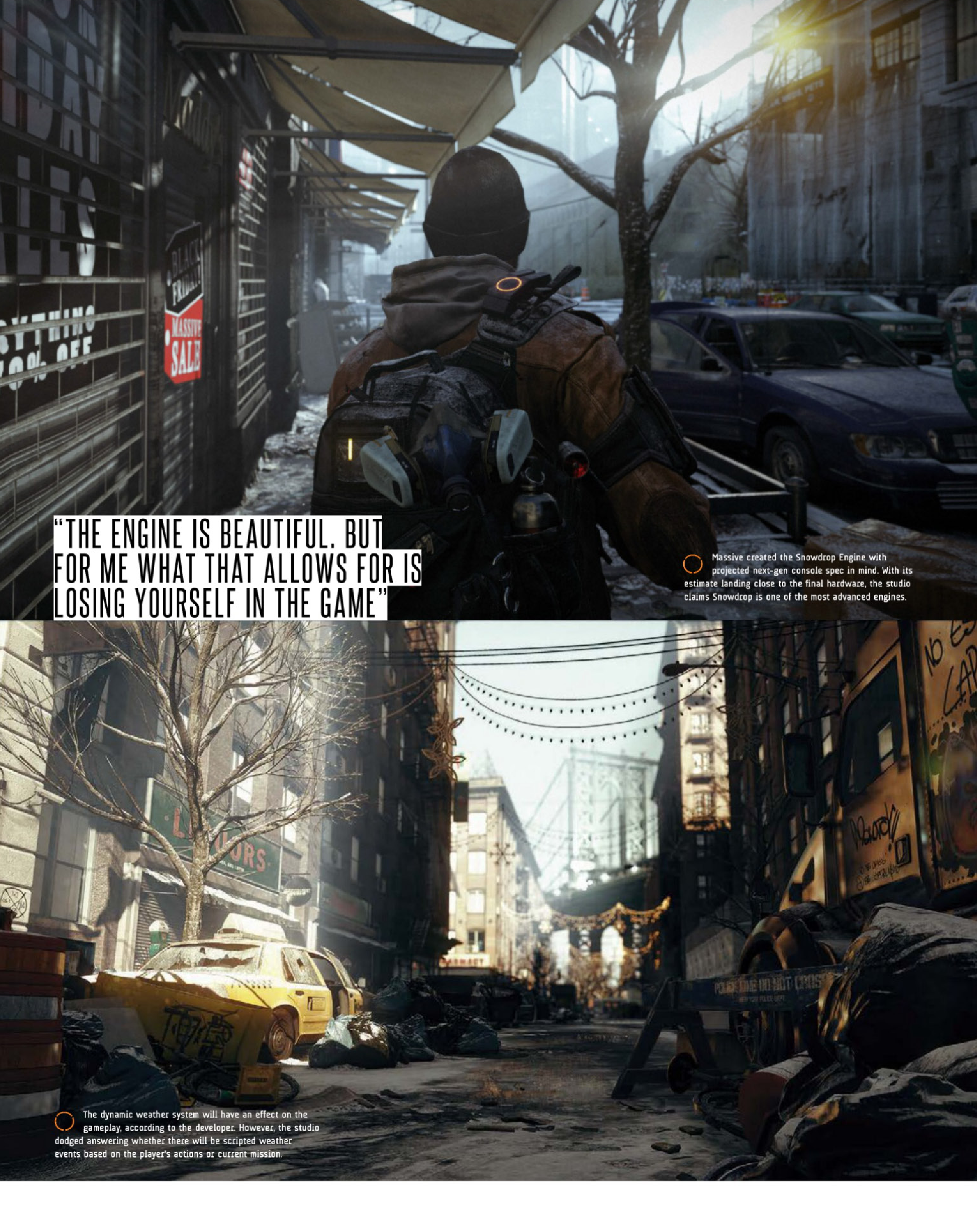


The CryEngine 3 has been designed to steal the middleware market out from underneath Unreal Engine's nose. Crytek claims that its engine is already as advanced as its competitor, offering a suite of high-end features and accessibility that enables developers to quickly implement changes and design decisions.

RED ENGINE 3
Developer: CD Projekt RED



The tech behind the upcoming *Cyberpunk 2077* and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, CD Project RED's engine has been designed to buff up the contemporary RPG so that its game-world presentation and epic scope matches that of top-shelf shooters. Aiming to blend storytelling and scale, the cinematics of the engine will feed both spectacle and emotional depth.



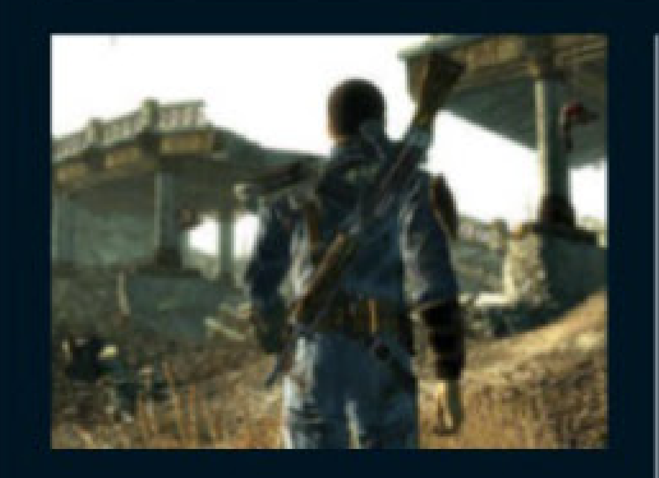
"THE ENGINE IS BEAUTIFUL. BUT FOR ME WHAT THAT ALLOWS FOR IS LOSING YOURSELF IN THE GAME"

Massive created the Snowdrop Engine with projected next-gen console spec in mind. With its estimate landing close to the final hardware, the studio claims Snowdrop is one of the most advanced engines.

The dynamic weather system will have an effect on the gameplay, according to the developer. However, the studio dodged answering whether there will be scripted weather events based on the player's actions or current mission.

THIS IS THE END

We take a look at the cities hit by major catastrophes and what chances you'd have of surviving the ruin



WASHINGTON

Game: Fallout

THERE'S NOTHING more harrowing than seeing a bunch of tourist attractions reduced to mere rubble. Some 200 years after a nuclear holocaust obliterated Earth's surface, hostile mutants and opportunist survivors now populate the wasteland, and when you're not worrying about them there's always the prospect of dying of radiation poisoning.

Chances of survival: Moderate



TOKYO

Game: Tokyo Jungle

HUMANKIND HAS become extinct and now animals have become the dominant life form on the planet. Still, if your horrific vision of the post-apocalyptic future features yapping Shih Tzus and farmyard cattle (oh, and carnivorous lions) then maybe you're best staying off the streets.

Chances of survival: High

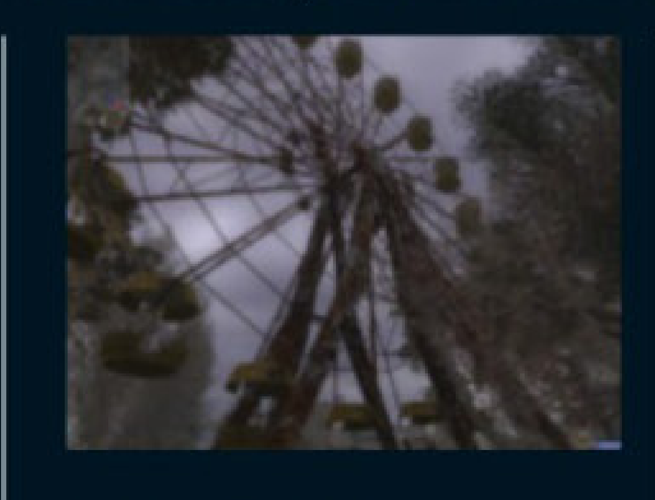


MOSCOW

Game: Metro 2033

NUCLEAR WAR is pretty bad, especially when it spreads deadly amounts of radiation across the planet's surface and forces its inhabitants to take refuge underground in a complex system of tunnels. Above ground there's toxic water and horrifically contorted creatures scavenging for human meat. Underground it's a claustrophobic cattle farm of people drinking themselves to death. Which is worse?

Chances of survival: Low

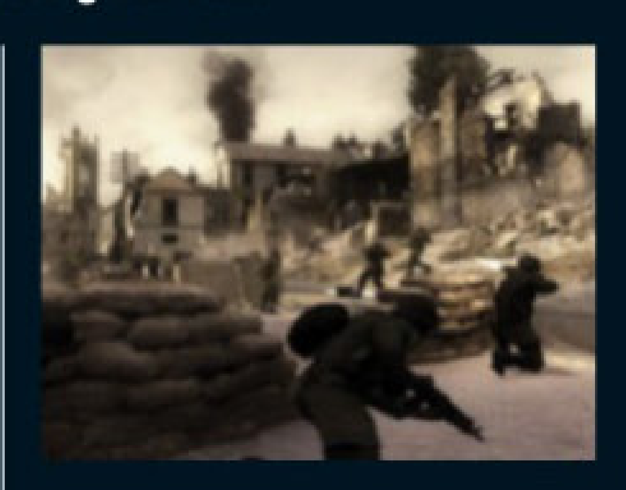


CHERNOBYL

Game: S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl

THE RUSSIANS seem to enjoy a bit of post-apocalyptic fantasy involving nukes. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, which is set in the aftermath of the real-life Chernobyl nuclear disaster (now a big tourist attraction in Ukraine), throws players inside "The Zone" where they must survive against hordes of deadly creatures. We bet that's not on the tour.

Chances of survival: Low

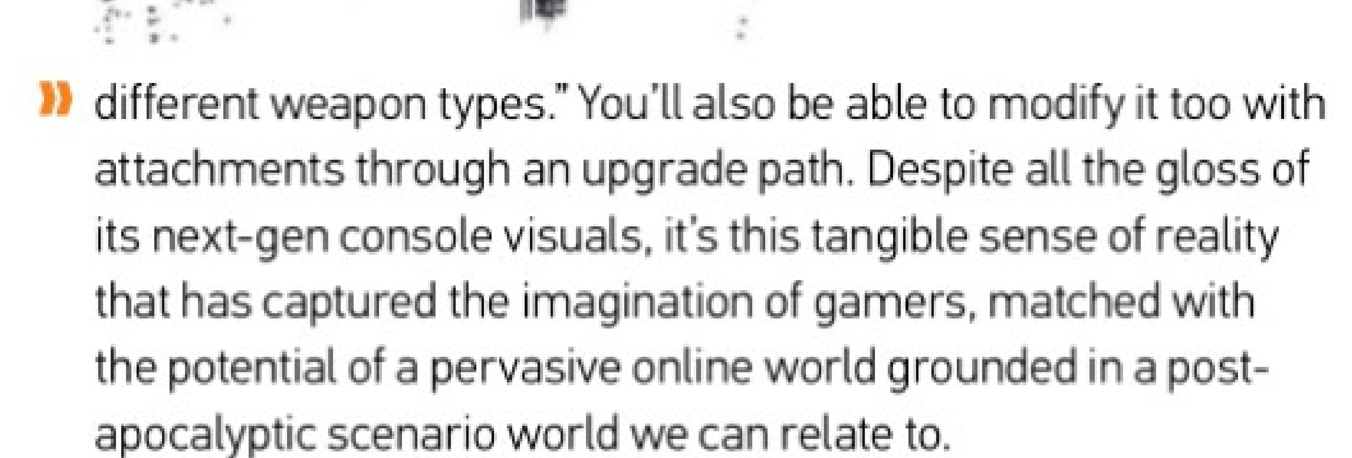


MANCHESTER

Game: Resistance

THE HOME of Oasis soon became the home of the Chimera in this alternate-history where aliens have seized control of the United Kingdom. There's no fighting over red or blue here, just different shades of dirt as this heavily armed extra-terrestrial invaders blast anything that stands in their way. Best give the Trocadero a miss then.

Chances of survival: None





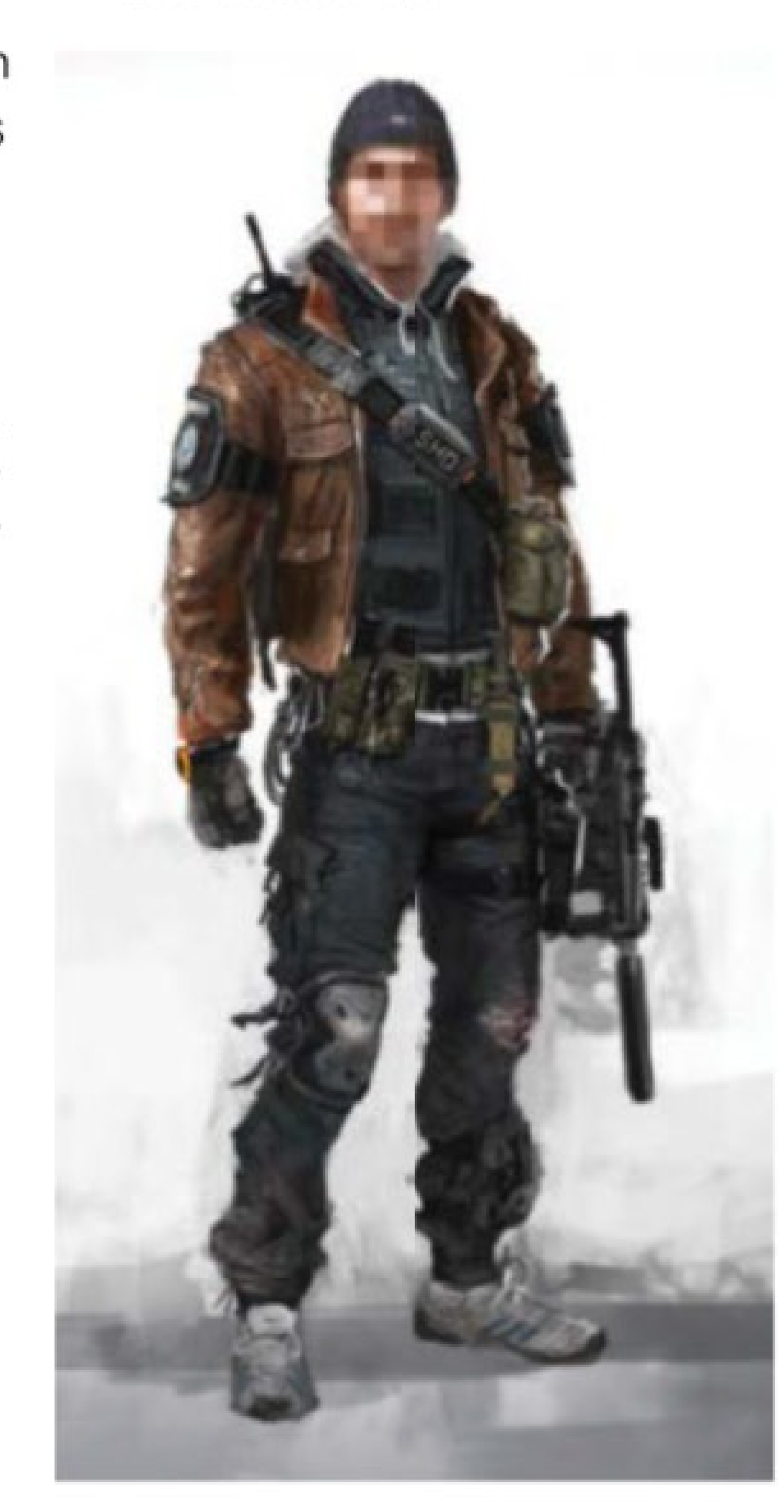
different weapon types." You'll also be able to modify it too with attachments through an upgrade path. Despite all the gloss of its next-gen console visuals, it's this tangible sense of reality that has captured the imagination of gamers, matched with the potential of a pervasive online world grounded in a post-apocalyptic scenario world we can relate to.

Today's modern online worlds rarely stray from grandiose fantastical visions of Tolkien-esque magical kingdoms and intergalactic warfare. The credibility afforded to *The Division* through the Clancy brand and the loose wish fulfilment of a multiplayer *The Last Of Us* makes it a unique prospect. But realising the scope of *The Division* has been a balance between crafting an experience both around the individual player and as a sprawling online arena.

Each player's game is their own personal copy of New York and other players have the choice to join your game and step inside your individual universe. Within that you'll also find PvP zones – where players are free to fight one another over loot. There will even be missions within one of the 'dark zones' – contaminated areas overrun with unlawful activity – that will pit players against one another. Massive has previously stated that within these dark zones players should be wary of who they trust, which suggests the developer has been eyeing up similar online survivalist fare such as *DayZ* as inspiration for tense cooperative and competitive scenarios that are only possible in MMOs.

Right now, there are scant few other details about the specifics of missions and how players will interact with the world, which is why it has attracted some controversy in recent months. After the delay of *Watch Dogs*, reports began to surface that *The Division* had not only suffered a delay but, outside of New York, the actual game itself had barely even begun development. "We're not commenting," retorts Bernard. "Everything is going well. People are always going to speculate, there's always going to be things flying around on the internet – that's what's great about the internet. Development is going great and we're on target for what we intended to be." But as spurious as those online claims may be, it's true that developing a new engine and game concurrently presented a range of challenges for the developer.

"WITHIN THE DARK ZONES, PLAYERS SHOULD BE WARY..."



"It doesn't matter what game you do or which engine you do, the first version has to lay the foundation for something," says Cortes. "This was an opportunity for us to tailor the engine to the game where we needed it and make a game that also took advantages of that engine. That was the biggest thing we could do, but it was a huge investment to work on that new technology and new IP. It does help to have new technology when you do a new IP." The result is nothing short of spectacular. From the clarity of the world itself, its dynamic weather and lighting systems that impact gameplay, through to the microscopic details that retain a sense of realism among the more cinematic bouts of action.

"It's just the level of immersion," Cortes continues. "Especially for this type of game, which is more of the RPG style, where the immersion is traditionally really low. On our side the immersion is key in everything and it comes to the lighting, to the fidelity the particles and the animation."

"But it's more than just graphical fidelity," adds Bernard. "The engine is beautiful. But for me what that allows for is losing yourself in the game. The more you feel immersed, the more things fit with weather, time of day those kind of things, the more I can lose myself in the environment and situation. The amount of things going on, it's unlike anything any other game can do or has done before."



THE YEAR OF CHAN

FROM UPGRADES TO EXISTING TECH TO CONCEPTS THAT COULD DRAMATICALLY CHANGE THE WAY WE PLAY GAMES, THIS IS WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR IN 2014



4 DEVICES THAT WILL CHANGE THE WAY WE SEE GAMES



VIRTUAL REALITY

1 There's little to say on virtual reality that we haven't already said, but with so much money being pumped into this particular market – both from Sony, Oculus and potentially even Microsoft – it's clear there's a driving force for what is already being pitched as the 'future of gaming'. It's not yet clear whether mainstream gamers will take to the device, but with the financial backing of Facebook involved it's clear VR is here to stay.





MICROSOFT ILLUMIROOM

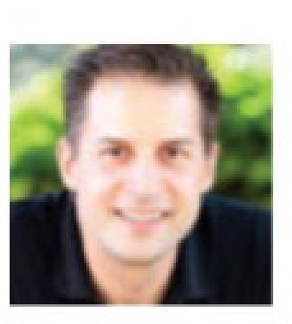
2 This one is particularly exciting, and it's something Microsoft has already officially unveiled. IllumiRoom combines Kinect with a projector that then displays peripheral imagery *outside* of the TV. Having your walls plastered with extra effects will be enough to truly immerse you into your games, as well as helping to add that extra atmospheric tension. The tech could even be used to hide all the extra data about the game – health bars, ammo and the like – as well as minimaps and menu info, leaving your TV for just the core gameplay. Even now the tech already has the ability to detect objects in your room and clever manipulation can even have the peripheral lighting interact with *your* world, not just the virtual room. If Microsoft actually utilises the tech in a consumer environment, it could drastically alter the way we absorb our games.



THE INNOVATORS

While it would be a disservice to say much of the innovation of the industry comes from individuals, it's hard to deny that there are always faces associated with success. These are those faces, and this is how they could form the future of the games industry

DAVID PERRY



Cutting his teeth on developing games – key among them being the 16-bit *Earthworm Jim* games – Perry has since become better known for his championing on cloud gaming at Gaikai, the company that Sony bought out with the intentions of powering PS Now.

PALMER LUCKEY



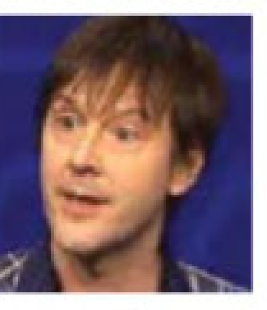
Founder of Oculus and key figurehead for virtual reality, Luckey is something of a prodigy. Having made Oculus Rift, successful pitched it on Kickstarter and then sold the company to Facebook for $2 billion, Palmer Luckey is the kind of 21-year-old we all hate: the talented genius.

MARK ZUCKERBERG



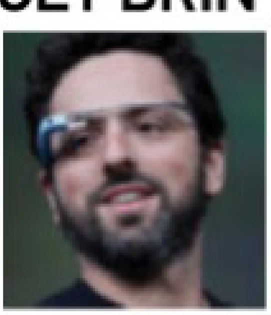
To many the epitome of corporate America, Zuckerberg's vast fortune and influence means he has now become a deciding factor on how the games industry is viewed. With Oculus now a subsidiary of Facebook, only time will tell whether this is good news or bad news for VR.

MARK CERNY



Cerny has only risen to prominence recently, but his credentials are nothing short of impressive. With Sony pushing out Cerny as the head of PS4 development – and presumably its technologies down the line – it's clear this is a man we'll be seeing more of in the future.

SERGEY BRIN



There isn't really a figurehead for Google Glass, but Google co-founder Brin has on occasion been the one to highlight the benefits of the tech at various conferences. Undoubtedly his decisions will make or break AR – at least when it comes to Glass – and by extension the likelihood that we'll see it come to gaming, too.

SECOND SCREEN

3

The idea of the second screen has been thrust unrequited down our throats so often the mere mention of it will likely cause a gagging reflex, but there is some promise to it. At the moment, while *Battlefield 4* enables Commander Mode through a tablet and *The Division* hopes to offer a similar remote gameplay through quad-rotor control, these options are still separate experiences – thereby negating the whole point of a *second* screen. Truth is, these additives are mostly answers from panicked suits hoping to capitalise on the mobile gaming trend; no, second screen isn't the future – at least in this sense. It's more of an inclusive approach that will dominate our console's future, and Nintendo's Wii U is the obvious example that enables you to take your gaming experience off the main TV – for when family dictates it out of bounds – and enjoy it through the GamePad itself. Sony has extended that with the PS4 and the PS Vita's Remote Play, a feature that doesn't get nearly enough praise for its slickness – providing there's a stable Wi-Fi connection. Second screen perhaps won't overhaul gaming as we know it, but it will become such an integral part of our gaming lives that we won't even notice the change – and that's the holy grail for any tech innovation.



> "Second screen won't overhaul gaming, but it will become an integral part of our games"



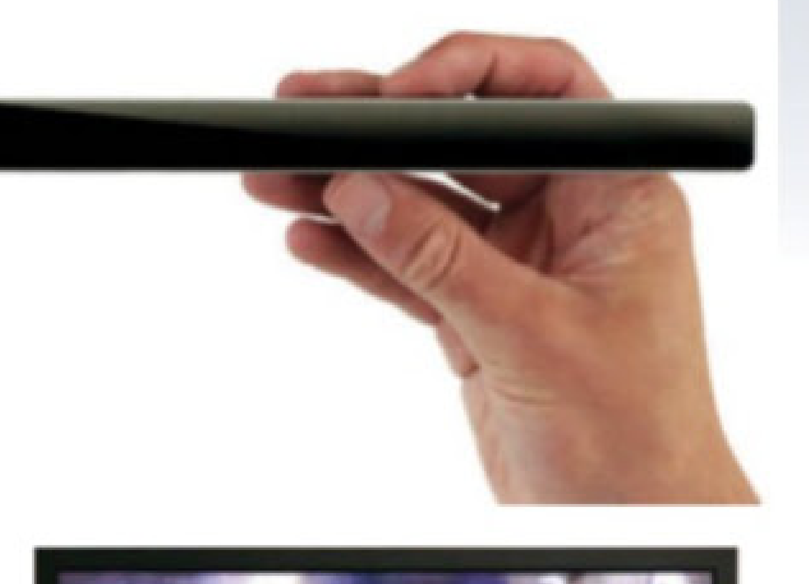
4K TV

4

Out of the three console manufacturers there's only one with its dreams pinned on 4K TV – Sony. It's a technology that has been burgeoning for years, and it is said that – after this – there is no further increase in resolution needed; our paltry human eyes won't ever need much more since the upgrade would be wasted. So it's not quite the same as the 3D fad, thankfully. Sony is obviously going to want to drive a lot of demand for this, but sadly no next-gen console is yet capable of 4K gaming. The PS4 is the closest – it *can* do 4K TV – but there's nothing to say that, as the hardware of the console is mastered, the PS4 will be able to manage 4K. It could even be in conjunction with cloud gaming for a potential workaround. All the same, Sony will be looking to drive this market, because that can only mean more potential customers for its 4K Bravia TVs.



DEVICES THAT WILL CHANGE THE WAY WE INTERACT WITH GAMES







EYE TRIBE

1 You may not have heard of Eye Tribe, but it's a camera peripheral that can be bought already and it enables eye-tracking to take control of a software without having to use to a mouse or controller. It's currently available to developers for the low price of $99, and a simple software development kit means they can get to work on creating software utilising it. It is currently, however, only available for Windows PCs – with Macs soon – and some gamers are even using it, or products like it, to overcome any handicaps they may have when it comes to using a controller. Eye-tracking would remove many of the barriers to gaming – such as having to 'learn the controls' – and in that sense such a piece of hardware would really appeal to a wider market. Whether or not happens will really rely on how successful Eye Tribe can make itself in its current form – because while it may be great for everyday use, gamers need to know it exists before we can truly appreciate it.

BRAINWAVE CONTROL

2 This might be stepping a little too close to nonsense – and the truth is the tech could still be a way off – but Sony has patented what it termed a 'Gaze Sensor'. Though this is largely attributed to eye-tracking – an already likely gaming future – one appendage to the patent did suggest a secondary input could be controlled through brainwaves and/or emotions. Sounds like sci-fi hokum, of course, but a company called Emotiv Systems has already created a headset that can interpret commands just by thinking them, albeit in a fairly crude form. It may take some time before the technology is ready to manipulate games, but the potential is already there. With Sony looking into potentially building such a device, who knows, maybe it'll even find its way into Project Morpheus someway down the line.





VOICE CONTROL

3 Voice control has long been a feature of gaming – remember way back on PS2 with *SOCOM* and the bundled microphone? – but it's only now that the technology and the software behind it has become sophisticated enough to enable gaming through voice. With both the PS4 and the Xbox One having camera peripherals that enable voice commands, the potential is already in place – and there are games in the works for it too. Take *There Came An Echo*, for example, an intriguing RTS game where your squad can be controlled entirely via voice. With the hardware already in place, there should be no excuse for innovative games to rise out of the underutilised mechanic.

HAPTIC INPUT

4 Ever since Rumble Paks we've had haptic feedback in games, but it's only with the rise of touch-screen devices that we've seen a popular form of haptic *input*. Relying on force or pressure, haptic input intends to replicate the sensation of touch into our games – and with the Wii U, PS Vita and even the PS4 all sporting a form of touchpad control, it's clear there's an interest from the console manufacturers. Truth be told we've yet to see a definitive use for it, with most relying on gimmickry to sell us on the conceit. Shortcutting menus, activating particular abilities or just searching a map might not sound like thrilling uses for the technology, but we will soon find ourselves regularly making use of such functions.





LEAP MOTION

5 We've all fantasised about that *Minority Report* future, about swiping through tabs on a browser with our hands, closing a window by throwing it away and even manipulating objects in 3D space. It appeals to inherent need every game has to just mess with stuff. That's what Leap Motion aims to do, a small device that sits on a desk or coffee table in front of you. It enables the user to use their hands – free of gadgets or technology – to alter their screen in some way. It's kind of like an extension of PlayStation Move, but without that bright glowing orb. The device can take the actions from the hand and recreate them on-screen: imagine a clay-modelling game, smashing down walls *Red Faction*-like with your own fists or something more inquisitive and tactile like *The Witness* – all by interacting with the empty space in front of you.



6 DEVICES THAT WILL CHANGE THE WAY WE EXPERIENCE GAMES

VIRTUIX OMNI

1 It's perhaps difficult to imagine the future of gaming is a multidirectional base, a guardrail and a VR headset – but there could be some benefits to it. Virtuix Omni is far too expensive and cumbersome to be suitable for home use, but there could be room for it in various arcades across the country. Much like the novelty of the plastic gun with *Time Crisis*, playing the likes of *Team Fortress 2* with Virtuix Omni could easily be a compelling experience as you control the game – in real-time – by moving around yourself.



STEAM MACHINES

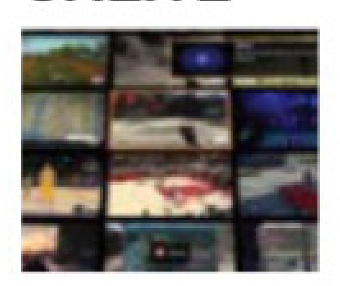
2 Rumours were flying, hype was building; 2013 was going to be the year Valve announced *Half-Life 3*, exclusive to its Steam Machine. Of course the truth wasn't nearly as exciting, but will the revealed range of living room PCs really change the nature of our traditional gaming habits? There's certainly a potential here for these Steam Machines – and their associated Linux-driven SteamOS – to dominate over the PS4 and Xbox One, but there's quite a number of questions that need to be answered first: Will the multiple models not just confuse potential buyers? Will tech-savvy gamers not just realise it'd be cheaper to buy a desktop PC and link that up to their living room TV? Will that controller really enable the depth and flexibility of a mouse and keyboard? It's clear Valve is determined to bring its own OS into the world but unless *Half-Life 3* is an exclusive for it, we'll need to gaze into our navels just a little longer.



BEST-LAID PLANS

Not everything works out so well in the world of tech, and while well-meaning innovators may think they're on the right track – even if, sometimes, they are – not everything plays out as expected. Ironically many of the most recent tech failures are actually attuned to some of the most interesting potential gaming futures in our main list – but are these ahead of their time or just poorly executed promises?

ONLIVE



As a beacon for cloud gaming, there was a lot of potential to OnLive. Sadly the service – however well thought out it may have been – suffered simply by being unable to provide the quality gamers demanded. Though it wasn't the case for everyone, many didn't maintain the stable connection required for a flawless playing experience, resulting in YouTube-esque artefacts in the video feed.

OUYA



From the highs of a record-breaking Kickstarter to the lows of bargain bin treatment, Ouya was a novel idea that had the potential to ride the indie new wave to success. The lack of games meant most Kickstarter backers have sold or traded their Ouyas, while the rest of the world barely remembers it even happened.

PROJECT SHIELD



Nvidia is on the back foot from the surge of AMD's popularity, but Project Shield certainly isn't the solution. When even the likes of excellent handheld consoles like the PS Vita and the 3DS are still met with scorn from some areas of the gaming public, taking an Android tablet and turning it into an ill-advised controller-cum-screen is not the answer.

3D GAMING



Much like it was thrust upon us by the film industry, the fad that was 3D gaming has – thankfully – bypassed most of us without much concern. The cost of the TVs is what really held the technology back, and the slow uptake meant that very few games were actually built to allow for three-dimensional feedback. Even the 3DS tends to have its 3D slider stuck firmly in the 'off' position.

SONY PSP GO



It feels unfair to be too critical of the PSP Go because at least Sony was brave (foolish?) enough to trial a digital-only future. Of course it was a huge flop, with Sony actually scrapping the product line altogether after only 18 months of availability. In some ways we should be thankful, however; it sent a clear message to all who were watching: we don't want digital-only.



WEARABLE TECH

3 The idea of wearing technology is becoming increasing popular outside of videogames. Samsung's a key player in this market meaning that – if this technology does take off – we could be looking at a surprising fourth entry into the competitive market. The beauty of wearable tech is that it can take any form, and while the typical object is a watch-like device, others have opted for motion-detecting wristbands, arm straps that can project a game onto your forearm and even devices sewn into clothing. In all likelihood it'll be the smart-watch that wins out – simply because it is the most logical – and once that's had time to properly gestate we could be playing all sorts of wonders on our wrists.



OPEN-SOURCE GAMING

4 Open-source is hardly a new concept, but it's certainly risen in popularity over the years – especially on the PC side of things. Given the rise of free-to-play – whether on mobiles or on PC – and the likes of Ouya, open-source as a concept is increasingly popular, and not just the domain of diehard fans hoping to recreate their favourite franchises. Sony and Microsoft likely won't see the potential for such a market, however, and even if the pair are battling for the indies with this latest generation it's unlikely that either side will want to loosen up the barriers for developers enough to allow for open-source development. It's increasing on PC, however, so maybe that's where the future lies.

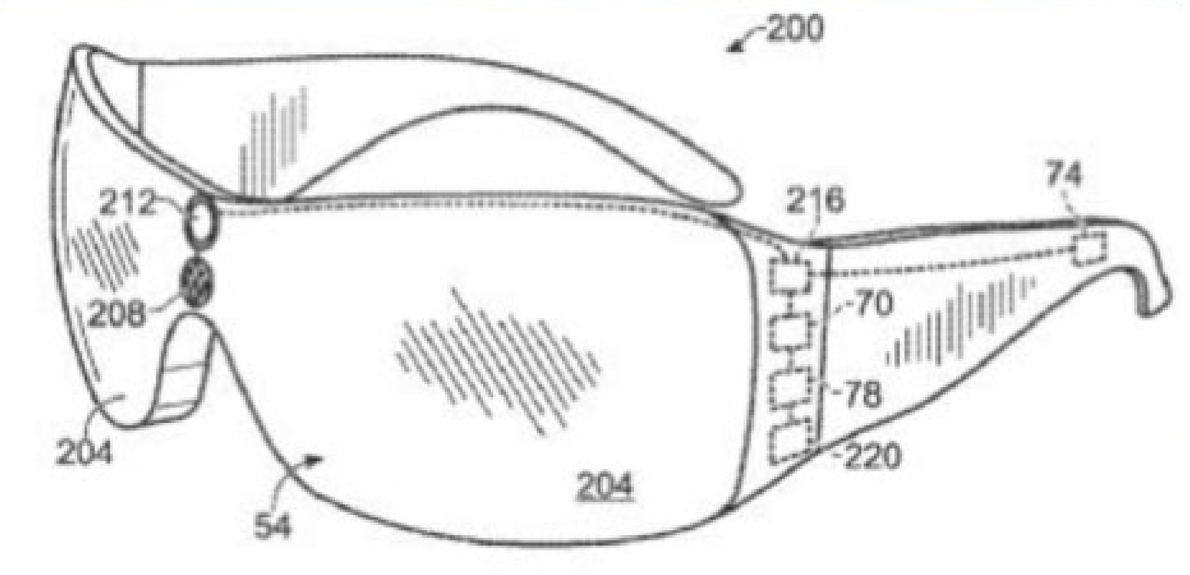
CLOUD GAMING

5 While Sony isn't pioneering the technology, its acquisition of Gaikai and release of PS Now proves that it is a possibility. By enabling us to access a back-catalogue of PS1, PS2 and PS3 games, Sony will have resolved the lamented loss of backwards compatibility. Though there have been few opportunities to see it put into practice, the promise of being able to stream PS4 gameplay while the rest is being downloaded will prove the case for the potential of cloud gaming. Being able to play the likes of The Last Of Us on practically any tech device can only strengthen the ubiquity of the PlayStation brand. Microsoft, too, is getting involved, though the real truth behind the 'Power of the Cloud' is yet to be realised. Currently we only have promises of AI and graphical computation happening on a server elsewhere, then beamed directly into your game – with none of that computation happening on your Xbox One. Either way, it's clear that cloud gaming will be the future.



AUGMENTED REALITY





6 It's been ticking along quietly since its world-shaking announcement in 2012, but now Google Glass is becoming far more tangible, far more real. During April it was possible to purchase your very own Google Glass, and get involved with the testing and development. Many of the everyday features already built into Google Glass would undoubtedly become gamified, such as your early morning jog around the block persistently tracking and monitoring (and undoubtedly with Achievements for 'playing' consecutively) your daily improvements.

But more than that, AR glasses could enable real-world hidden object games with puzzles built into the very world around you, a sneaky eye-controlled game of *Tetris* while on the bus or just a multiplayer FPS where the gun is a deadly point of your finger. Microsoft is interested enough, too, with numerous patents (some as recent as March) indicating the company's interest in head-mounted display units. Previous patents allude to the potential for Kinect Glasses, but the most recent suggest rhythm-action dance games or AR multiplayer sword fighting. Other users could discover more about players through these Kinect Glasses – finding their profiles automatically, tracking their current activities and even send invites to join in with a multiplayer game session. It's a future that Microsoft is considering, the fact that Google is already producing something similar only seeks to validate this.

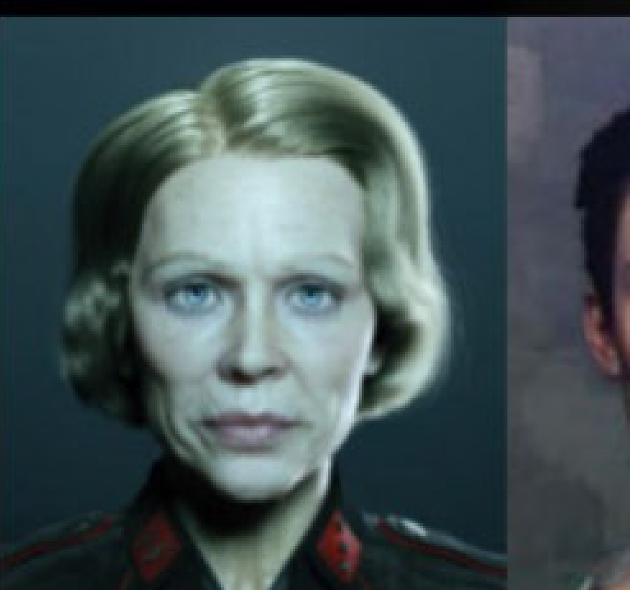
REWRITING HISTORY



GAMES™ TALKS TO MACHINEGAMES ABOUT THE INFLUENTIAL LEGACY OF WOLFENSTEIN, AND HOW THE STUDIO WANTS TO LIVE UP TO THE SERIES' IMPACTFUL HERITAGE WITH ITS NEW TITLE THE NEW ORDER










GLASGOW
GLASGOW

Game franchises that stagger their releases over decades often have to consider their continued relevance. *Wolfenstein 3D* provided a benchmark moment for gaming – it proved that well-designed, well-produced and, well, functional 3D shooters were possible. id Software's iconic game is hailed as the father of first-person shooters: a release that triggered a shift from the side-scrolling shooter it was based on (*Castle Wolfenstein*), and thus moved the whole industry into new territory. There was a ten-year gap between *Wolfenstein 3D* and its next 'true' sequel *Return To Castle Wolfenstein*, during which time technological progress allowed the release to enter real 3D (the former game using a mix of ray casting and scaled sprites to create the illusion of 3D). But that wasn't the only discrepancy – in the absence of the franchise, games had evolved. Killing unidentifiable German troops – just because they were Nazis – had become outdated, with games now focusing on more modern, domestic threats, and shooters themselves losing popularity in favour of sports games, platformers and brawlers. *Return To Castle Wolfenstein* had to take a fresh angle on the Nazi problem, and it did – emphasising the stealth roots of the series – thus making the sequel a relevant and popular release.

MachineGames is facing a similar situation with its upcoming title *Wolfenstein: The New Order*. The gap between this release and the last *Wolfenstein* instalment isn't quite the ten-year gulf *3D* and *Return* endured (Raven Software's simply titled *Wolfenstein* was released only half a decade ago in 2009) – but there's still a discernible gap there, and not just in terms of time. The gaming landscape has drastically altered since 2009 – FPS games are now generally seen as multiplayer experiences; jump-in, jump-out titles whose focus is on developing addictive gameplay, rather than a solid campaign. MachineGames wants to fly in the face of that paradigm, strip *Wolfenstein* back to its core and rebuild the experience around it.

It's odd, then, that the studio has moved *Wolfenstein* so far away from its World War II roots – the series has become infamous for its focus on Nazi Germany and over-the-top, gratuitous violence. MachineGames has subverted this, and put machinations in place that will take the game into a more modern setting (well, the Sixties) – sitting snugly amongst the plethora of other forward-facing FPS games that are homogenising the market at the moment. But there's a reason deeper than superficial trend-following behind this decision. "It was important for us to not let the environments and surroundings become creatively limiting," explains creative director Jens Matthies. "If you're in a strict World War II setting, you can't really do Nazi robots, or extreme outlandish weapons or the crazy over-the-top stuff that we really want to do, that we think is enjoyable to create, that will be enjoyable to play. The more literal we went with the WWII setting, the more restricting it would have been. So when we started thinking about various approaches we could take, the modern setting is the one we all gravitated towards because it's a fresh angle on the universe, but it also allows us a lot of leeway to do really interesting things."



LONE WOLF

Keeping the single-player focus

The New Order's publisher, Bethesda, has a strong legacy of single-payer only games, and is keen to push the solo campaign route MachineGames is taking with their title – an oddity amongst the current trend of multiplayer-focussed FPS releases. "We felt we did the best work when the whole team was totally focused," explains Matthies, "and we didn't want different parts of the game to pull in different directions, so we were pretty adamant that we'd go with single-player only and make aim to make it the very best possible experience we could. We're lucky in that we've got a good publisher that is very quality oriented – so when we said 'trust us, this will make the best game', [Bethesda] was totally on board."

It's a brave and sharp decision by MachineGames to play with *Wolfenstein*'s legacy in this way – the developer is a fledgling studio, a newcomer to the *Wolfenstein* IP, and if it travelled the route a lot of the other studios that have attempted to tackle the series have taken, could have found itself playing in the muddied water of cliché and repetition. Instead, MachineGames' Nazi-controlled Sixties world is a unique and innovative take on the universe, and is enough to grab the attention of gamers that would have otherwise put the *Wolfenstein* IP aside as just another gaming casualty – a relic of times gone by that clung to its roots too strongly.

The premise of MachineGames' *The New Order* is simple: recurring protagonist BJ Blazkowicz (a Polish-American army ranger) has been institutionalised in an asylum where he's been suffering from amnesia. After he escapes, Blazkowicz steps up to fight the massive Nazi regime in a re-imagined world where the fascist party won World War II. Though amnesia is a tried and tested way of wiping the slate clean for a character that you *have* to bring back, *The New Order*'s narrative designer Tommy Tordsson is fully aware of how to take advantage of the trope; "One of the most interesting things we encountered when we began to explore this project was the character of BJ, because he is this template Eighties action hero on the surface, but when you get to try and investigate what kind of person he is underneath, you can come

approach to international political affairs), and we think it's something that games have the potential to pull off better than any other media. *Wolfenstein: The New Order* also has the ability to satirise the uber-violence and genre tropes, thanks to the series' roots in over-the-top action and self-aware playfulness (yes, we're talking about Mecha-Hitler from *Wolfenstein 3D*). Nazis, traditionally, are a delicate subject matter to write about, but Tordsson is confident *The New Order* approaches the issue consciously. "What we're trying to do here is similar, I think, to what Tarantino does," he reflects, "we're taking these almost stereotypical situations and characters and trying to add humanity to them. It might be ridiculous, or overblown, or clichéd, but it might also be very humorous – or very thought provoking." The mention of Tarantino immediately lead us to draw comparisons to *Inglourious Basterds* – which shares many of the same anti-Nazi themes as *The New Order*. "In a way, I guess we're pretty similar! It's definitely one way you can look at how we've approached this: to see what else we can do beyond simply 'kicking Nazi ass' the whole game."

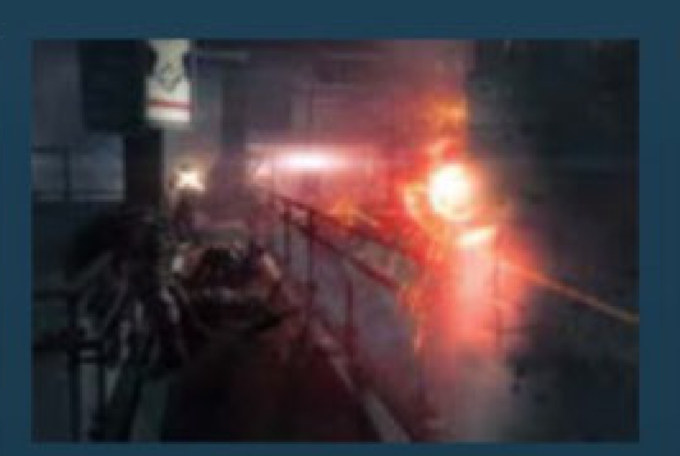
"If we're talking about how you treat the subject matter, look at the comic book movies of recent years," adds Matthies. "They've

> "When you compare us to Wolfenstein 3D, it's quite interesting to see how far games have come, and the progress we've made in trying to become a true art form"
> Tommy Tordsson, narrative designer

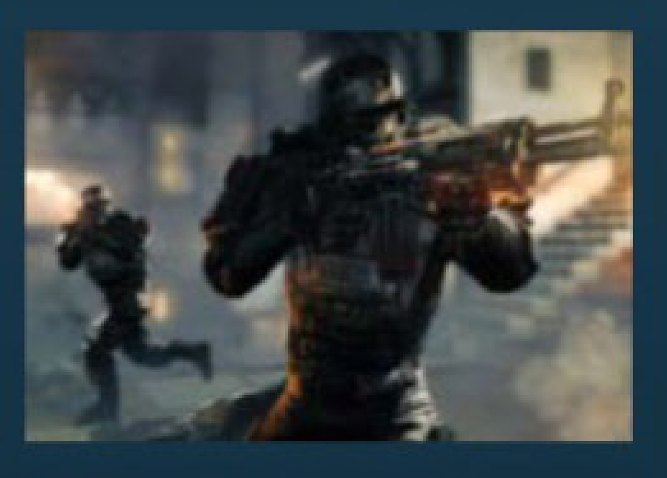
up with really cool ideas to juxtapose his pre-conceived notion of what a game action hero is supposed to be. We wanted to see how he's changed throughout the series of *Wolfenstein*, and how all the fighting has damaged him during the years." BJ has always been a character whose actions have defined him – he's killed more cyber-Nazis than any other protagonist we can think of – so it's interesting to see MachineGames' take on the property flip the lens a little and examine the man behind the machine guns.

But a protagonist is nothing without a world of oppression to fight against. The game is set across Europe, and is canon to 2009's *Wolfenstein*, despite being a reboot in its own, artistic way. "We're not trying to make an historical account of events, by any means, but we really wanted the alternate history to feel true for it to carry any kind of meaning," explains Tordsson. "I think that what we're trying to do with this *Wolfenstein* instalment is build the David vs. Goliath story, where the player goes up against the Nazi forces – but a Nazi force that has taken over the entire world. Yes, it's over the top, but we went back and did a lot of research into WWII, into Nazi ideology, and how that would shape the world if they had taken over – which I think is very important to consider when you're trying to create speculative fiction like this."

It's that fictional angle that appeals to us the most. The developer has made it clear that it wants its Sixties-inspired Nazi world to feel *real*, to feel *authentic*. We haven't seen historically aligned game fiction like this since *Homefront* (which was less than subtle in its



■ The excessive and varied weaponry of the series seems to have been kept fully intact. You can even dual-wield shotguns



■ The more modern Nazi designs are a welcome change from the traditional SS Troopers that we've encountered so many times before. Marrying traditional Nazi aesthetics with Sixties fashion is inspired.

become really good, and people have gotten really passionate about them, and that's because they're *good*. And they're good because the people that make them take the subject matter seriously. If you take something like Christopher Nolan's *Batman* series – at its most fundamental, it's about a guy in a leather suit, dressed like a bat, and the antagonist is this guy dressed like a clown. There's something very cartoony and silly about that, but if you can treat the subject matter seriously and you can write and perform it in a way that's relevant and meaningful and interesting, it makes the contrast even stronger. That's what we're going for, and that's the situation that we're in. So you'll see a lot of over the top and crazy things, but you'll also have these intimate moments with your characters."

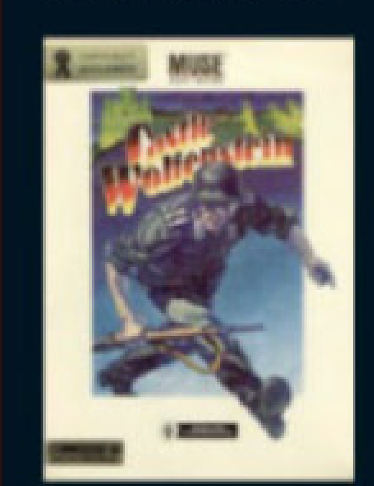
It's an interesting angle to take with *Wolfenstein* – a game that began with a characterless super-soldier blasting his way through a Nazi-infested castle, dual-wielding shotguns and shooting Hitler in the sensitives. MachineGames' satirical-but-considered approach to developing *The New Order* marks a poignant evolution of the series. We couldn't help but feel Matthies' metaphor about superhero movies was incredibly well-placed because, at its root, that's what a first-person game like *Wolfenstein* is: it's a power fantasy, and that aim of making the player feel like an invincible warrior has been the focus of the genre since it started finding its feet in the mid-Nineties. "There's something supremely fun and over-the-top and crazy about having a product with massive Nazi mechs or BJ Blazkowicz and his Eighties muscle-bound action-hero look," explains Matthies »

THE WOLVES AMONG US

Including the series' first game back in 1981, the Wolfenstein series has seen eight proper releases thus far. We've done our best to chronicle who did what in Wolfenstein's labyrinthine history...

CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN

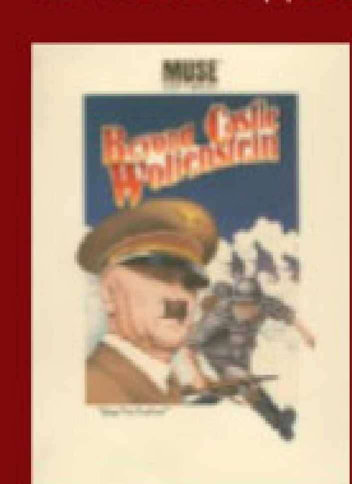
Developer: Muse Software
Platforms: Apple II, DOS, Atari 400/800, Commodore 64



■ THE ORIGINAL game – a stealth-based shooter – was released back in 1981 by Silas Warner. The whole flavour of *Wolfenstein* is down to Warner's work: as well as developing *Castle Wolfenstein*, he also designed 'The Voice' sound engine and the game engine itself that was used.

BEYOND CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN

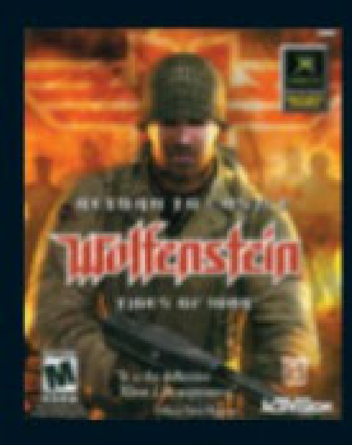
Developer: Muse Software
Platforms: Apple II, DOS



■ THE SECOND instalment of the *Wolfenstein* series – developed by the same team that worked on the original – featured a plot remarkably similar to the infamous 20 July 'plot to kill Hitler': the game saw a player descend through increasingly difficult levels of the Führer's bunker with the hopes of assassinating him at the end.

WOLFENSTEIN 3D

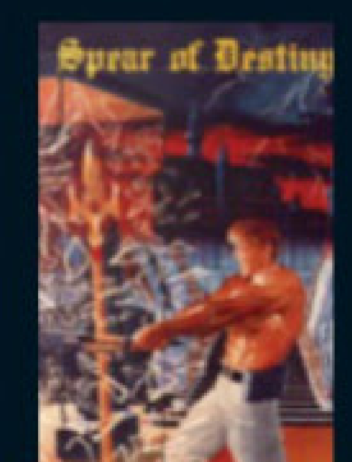
Developer: id Software
Platform: DOS (original)



■ WORK BEGAN on *3D* in 1991 when Muse Software's trademark on the series expired – id pitched a 3D remake of the original game to publisher Apogee Software, who granted the developer $100,000 on the understanding it would provide a shareware title. Apparently, the games (in)famous secret walls were heavily resisted by John Carmack.

SPEAR OF DESTINY

Developer: id Software
Platform: DOS (original)



■ A PREQUEL to id's original 3D masterpiece, *Spear Of Destiny* wasn't as popular as its predecessor – perhaps because the *Wolfenstein* brand wasn't incorporated into the title. *Spear Of Destiny* took more of a supernatural route through established *Wolfenstein* lore – tasking BJ with recapturing the titular sword from thieving Nazis.

RETURN TO CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN

Developer: Grey Matter Interactive/Nerve Software
Platforms: PC, Mac, PS2, Xbox



■ RETURNING TO the IP after ten years, Grey Matter's interpretation of the series was *Return To Castle Wolfenstein*, a heavily modified version of the *Quake III* engine, and was used as Infinity Ward and Activision's base for their first *Call Of Duty* game.

WOLFENSTEIN: ENEMY TERRITORY

Developer: Splash Damage
Platform(s): PC, Mac



■ ORIGINALLY INTENDED as an expansion to the previous *Return To Castle Wolfenstein*, issues with the single-player component caused the game to release as a freeware, standalone title. It's the only multiplayer-only *Wolfenstein* release, and started Splash Damage's career working on the multiplayer-specialised games.

WOLFENSTEIN RPG

Developer: Fountainhead Entertainment/ id Software
Platforms: Mobile, iOS



■ A DEPARTURE from the game's spiritual roots in action/stealth, the RPG reimagining was the least popular game in the series (although the emphasis on narrative did harken back to earlier games in the series). It was a valiant effort by id to go back to their roots, but one that sadly fell flat.

WOLFENSTEIN

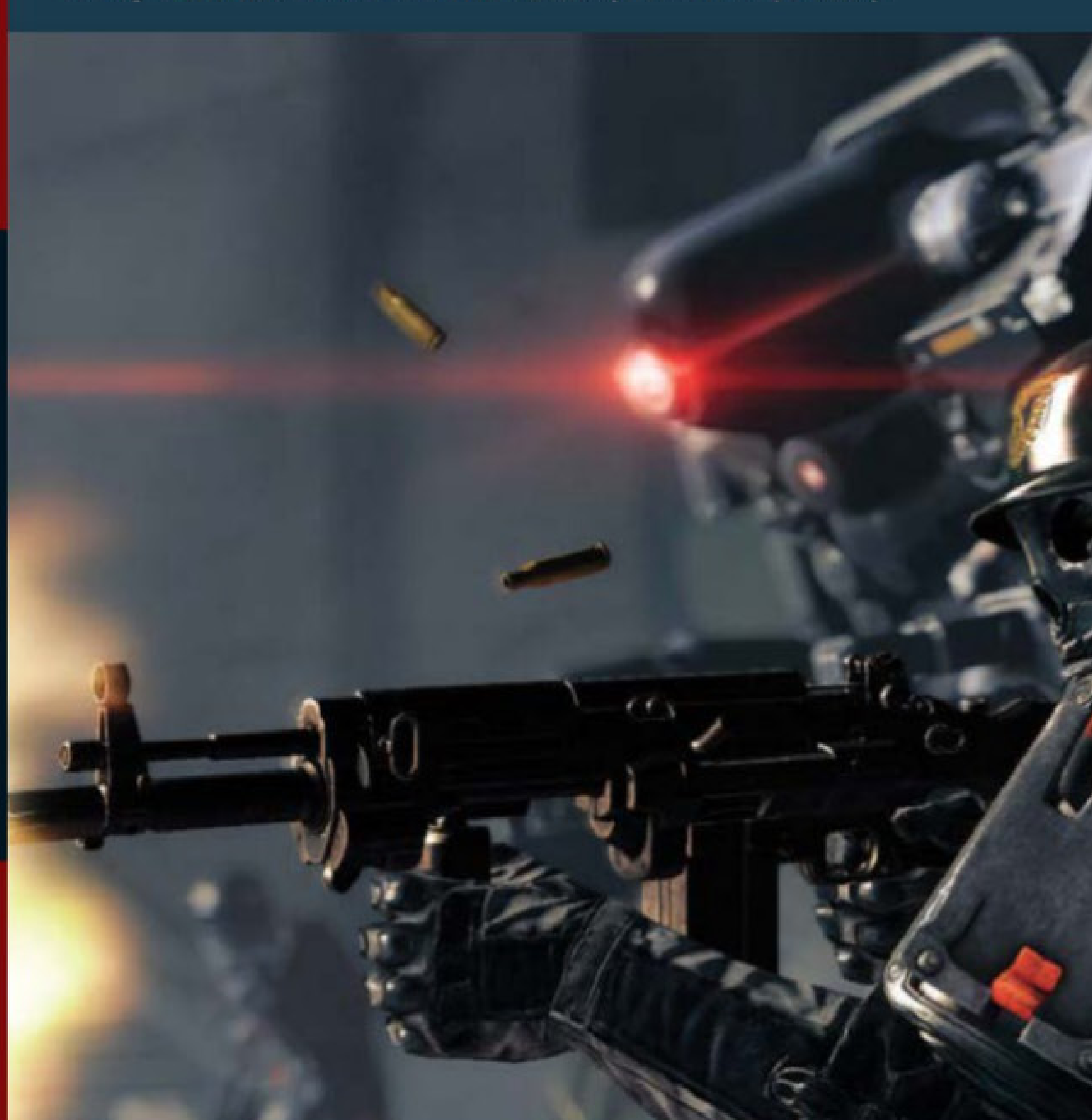
Developer: Raven Software/id Software
Platforms: PC, PS3, Xbox 360

■ A DIRECT sequel to the story of *Return To Castle Wolfenstein* story, Raven Software's take on the *Wolfenstein* series incorporated the previously touched upon (but vague) supernatural elements, wrangling them to become the central crux of the game's story. Low sales from the game saw Activision significantly downsize Raven Software





■ There are a lot of mechs you'll encounter through out the campaign – whether or not a giant mechanised Hitler will turn up remains to be seen, but from the hulking monstrosities we've seen so far, it certainly seems like a possibility.




■ The varied architecture and vibrant settings of Europe are a departure from the traditionally dingy and claustrophobic settings *Wolfenstein* hails from.

Matthies, "we've gone into the *Wolfenstein* universe and highlighted our favourite themes and taken them to their extremes, in some ways. We wanted to retain that edge of humour the series has always had, for example, but we also wanted to infuse this with a lot of humanity as well. We wanted to have blend of drama, and mystery and action and humour. It's not just one-dimensional; we wanted to hit a lot of different emotional tones here, to really show the kind of versatility we have, not just in the story, but in the gameplay and in the characters you'll meet throughout your journey."

When gamers look back to the original release of *Wolfenstein 3D*, they see a game that defined the FPS – that launched the genre into popular awareness and was instrumental in defining the lay of the land for gaming in the Nineties. Since then, games within the series have failed to innovate or enthuse audiences, often being too scared to break out of the (once) successful formula Wolfenstein 3D established. "We'd like *The New Order* to be remembered for what an incredibly varied and gameplay and story experience it was," explains Tordsson when we ask him about living up to 3Ds legacy, "and that it tried to push story into that deeper territory than we're used to – living up to titles like *The Last Of Us*. When you compare us to *Wolfenstein 3D*, it's quite interesting to see how far games have come, and the progress we've made in trying to become a true art form."

"I've never thought about [how the game will be remembered]," adds Matthies. "We don't approach it from that angle – we just want to create the best possible experience for the player; you know, we want them to grab the controller, sit down, and then it's two days later, they're exhausted and they've played the story through to the end [laughs]. That's always what we're shooting for – whether or not that has historical implications is never what we consider, not really." Matthies pauses for a second, and considers. "It would be lovely, though, if people saw the game as something that honoured the original *Wolfenstein 3D*, because that's really what we've been aiming for."

> "It's like Tarantino… we're taking these almost stereotypical situations and characters and trying to add humanity to them"
> Tommy Tordsson, narrative designer


■ There's more of a technological focus here, moving away from the occult and supernatural leanings of previous instalments

» enthusiastically. "There are so many outlandish elements built into the IP, and we like playing with them and taking advantage of the videogame conventions. You can take thousands of bullets and survive, because there are health packs. You are one guy that can kill thousands of enemies, or whatever – these things, by definition are unrealistic and OTT, and we want to couple that with human drama. We want you to understand and relate to these characters, so while things may not be realistic or plausible, they feel genuine and truthful and authentic."

This awareness of game mechanics, player expectation and narrative all seem to be lessons taken from MachineGames' former projects; though it's a new studio, the majority of the team has migrated across from Starbreeze, a developer that's best known for its work on the *Riddick* franchise and the first *The Darkness*. The team is adept at working with existing IP, and stamping its own unique mark on the collected series they encounter. But *Wolfenstein* isn't just any old IP – it's one of the most iconic franchises in videogames, and a more closely observed property than anything the team has worked with before. "We have definitely learned a lot from our time at Starbeeze," explains Tordsson, "particularly when it comes to handling other IPs. Our strengths lie in reinventing them, or at least adding multiple different levels into that experience. Going back to *Chronicles Of Riddick* or *The Darkness*, their tone sort of defined the approach we took, but we still asked 'What else is there to explore in these worlds? What has been left untapped?' So we always see what we can take from that, and go from there."

"Our experience at Starbreeze has certainly been part of the overall design mentality we've brought to this project," continues

FROM THE ASHES

MachineGames isn't the only studio that has splintered from another developer to start up its own project…

PLATINUM GAMES



■ SHINJI MIKAMi led the exodus of staff from Capcom's Clover Studio to found Platinum games, who took the lessons learned at the behemoth publisher to create off-the-wall games like *Bayonetta* and *MadWorld*, no longer inhibited by Capcom's corporate limitations.

ION STORM



■ BASED IN TEXAS, Ion Storm was founded by John Romero and Tom Hall – both leaving id Software to set up the new studio. Ion Storm is credited with setting up both the *Thief* and *Deus Ex* properties, making an impressive mark in gaming history.

RESPAWN



■ AFTER INFINITY Ward fired Jason West and Vince Zampella for 'insubordination' and 'breaches of contract', the CCO and CEO (respectively) set up Respawn – the studio that would go on to make the system-selling *Titanfall* for Xbox One

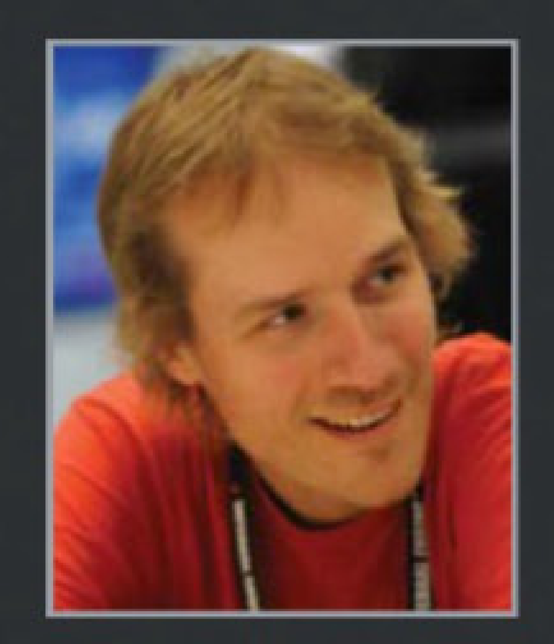
GHOST GAMES



■ THE *NEED For Speed Rivals* developer is the ghost (no pun intended) of Criterion Games – with 80% of the staff moving from Criterion to Ghost when the studio was founded. Unlike the others here, Ghost's fortunes didn't fare too well, with the UK branch of the studio seeing huge layoffs after Rivals' release.

THE UNANSWERED QUESTION





INSIDE THE MIND OF A CREATIVE ORIGINAL, **GAMES™** TALKS TO PASSAGE CREATOR JASON ROHRER

Eschewing blockbuster game development for something a little more personal, a little more artistic, Rohrer is something of a rarity these days – even among the indie scene. His games mean something. Starting out like any other developer, Rohrer didn't become fully immersed into indie game development until he visited Montreal's International Games Summit where he met modern day luminaries Phil Fish, Jonathan Blow and Chris Hecker. It was here, among his contemporaries, that Rohrer found his calling, but not because of those he had met.

"Some people didn't even know you could walk down," claims Rohrer, "and just thought you held down the right arrow key, and watched a little movie play. But it was actually a game with a score and a challenge, and all the other things that make a real, legitimate game. But a lot of people didn't know these things about it and thought it was just this artsy movie that you hold down one button to watch." All the same, *Passage* prompted a greater message that really appealed to Rohrer. "It sort of catapulted me into the centre of the conversation we were having at the time

the idea of a big unanswered question in a cultural endeavour; like, do we have big unanswered questions about jazz? Are there these unsolved problems in film? These things that we're still trying to figure out. But I think that as such a young medium we are actually struggling with unsolved problems, just the same way that film may have struggled with unsolved problems back in the early days when they didn't really know how to – for example – represent the passage of time in a compact way." Rohrer adds that as film has learnt its own grammar and language for providing

"AS SUCH A YOUNG MEDIUM WE ARE STRUGGLING WITH UNSOLVED PROBLEMS"

Instead it was the interactions he received – and the reactions he got – that Rohrer was drawn into discovering what games can *be*, into answering unanswered questions.

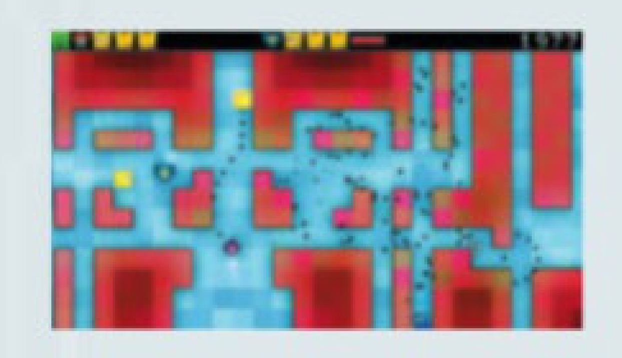
During his experiences at that IGS, by his own admission Rohrer had "this game that everybody was talking about. Or, more accurately, everyone was arguing about". Called pretentious, "not even a game" or simply cast off as rubbish, not everyone quite got to grips with it, either. That game was *Passage*, a story of life, love and – inevitably – death. There are no cutscenes or dialogue, its crammed into a window only 100 pixels by 16 in size and it automatically ends after five minutes. To most it was just 'artsy', but it was still a game.

about how games could be more expressive and how they could be more meaningful and what it would mean for a game to have something to say about human interactions or human relationships without resorting to cutscenes. That's what we were trying to figure out at the time."

And it's what Rohrer has been trying to figure out, in one way or another, with every game since then. The crux of his argument is that games have a unique opportunity to evoke responses in ways that any other medium cannot – the problem is figuring out how. "Essentially when I was becoming a game designer there were these big sort of 'unanswered questions', right. Some people would laugh at

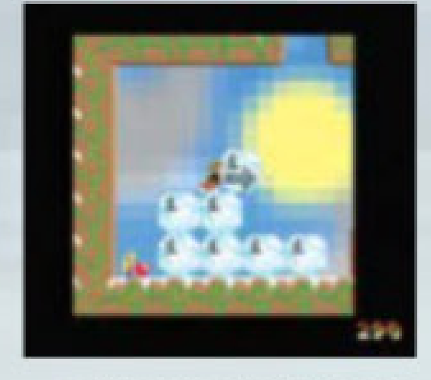
its audience with means of interpreting, so must games. And not by cribbing from other mediums, like the way cutscenes crossover with how movies tell stories.

"I think cutscenes and linear narratives and those kinds of things are basically saying 'Well, we have already figured out how to deliver artistic meaning from stories'," says Rohrer. "I think we need to figure out how to do it within games, using the things that are unique to games and the using the capabilities of games to somehow do something artistic. I don't want to put a paragraph of text up on the screen in my game, and I don't want to stop and have a non-interactive bit of narrative in my game." »

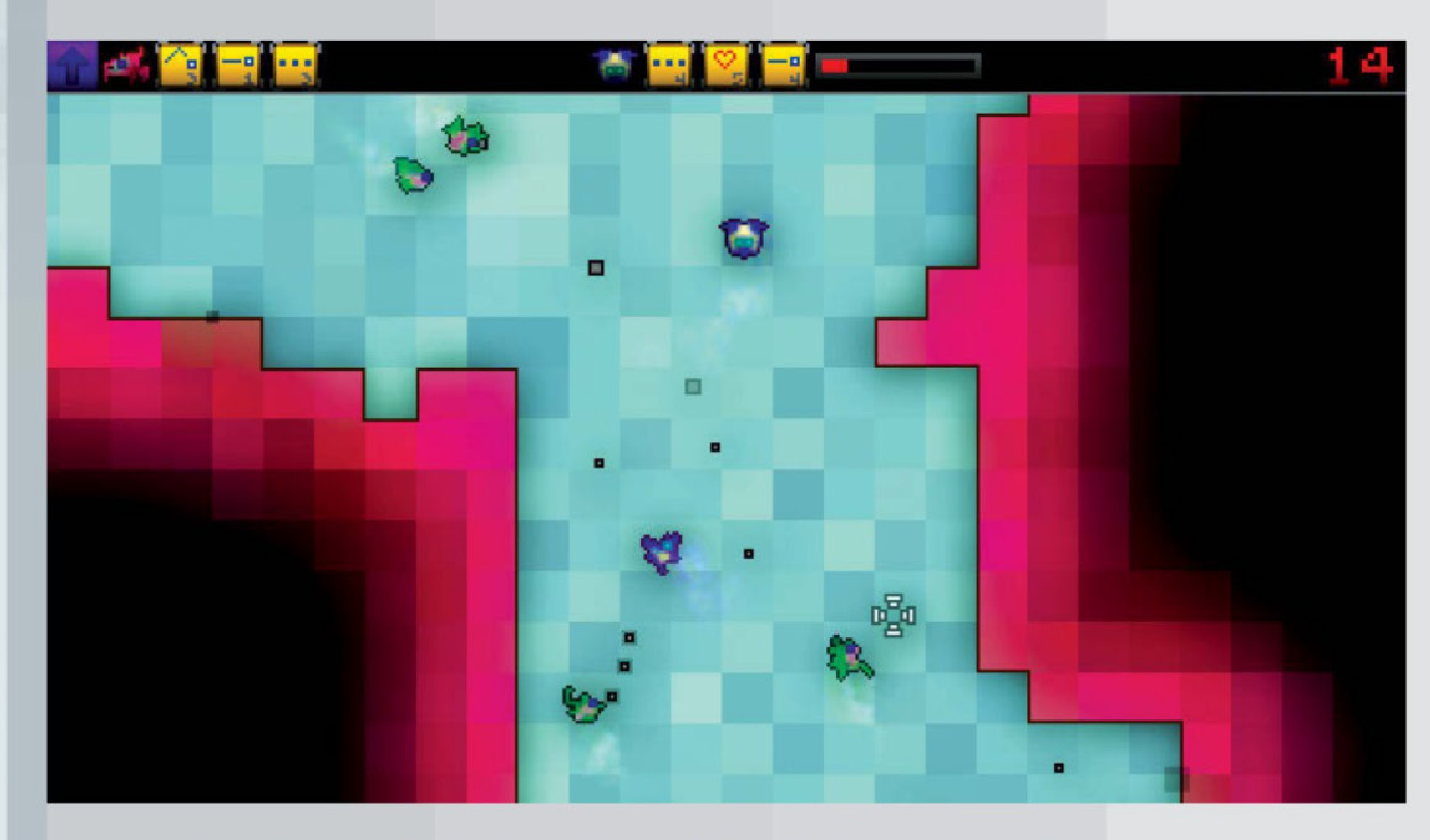


Rohrer has released 11 games to date. His latest, *The Castle Doctrine*, was released in January.





Passage is Rohrer's most notable title but he continues to innovate with each new release.



Speaking to Rohrer back in 2011, he explained how he practices simple living with his family.



Rohrer has buried his boardgame in an unknown location.



"I DIDN'T WANT TO MAKE PASSAGE-LIKE GAMES FOREVER, I STARTED THINKING BIGGER"

Rohrer's games cover a wide range of topics, emotions and concepts, ranging from the intimate – such as the need to be a good father – to the hugely broad – such as the concept of infinity. But Rohrer is aware that not all his ideas he will be able to communicate in videogame form "That was what, in part, lead me to *Sleep Is Death*," adds Rohrer. *Sleep Is Death* is a two-player storytelling game. Player one takes control of the main character, interacting with the world. Player two builds that world, and chooses the way interactions unfold. It is about conversation and interaction "I sort of felt like there was this huge unsolved problem," explains Rohrer: "you know, conversation is one of the most interactive experiences we have, and here we are with the most interactive medium of all time and we can't even tackle or make work about the most interactive experience in real-life."

Rohrer never aims to present his own opinions on a topic, but instead a means for the players at least to understand the emotions that might surround it. Such as *The Castle Doctrine*, Rohrer's latest game where you – the player – must build a home in such a way to protect your family and your money from burglars. These robbers, however, are other players, who can infiltrate your home, navigate your traps and even kill your family. It is a game close to Rohrer's heart, converging not only the unique gameplay mechanic but, also, his own personal feelings surrounding self-defence after his own family had been attacked.

"When you're breaking into someone's house and taking everything that they've worked so hard for over maybe a week – and even the wife and children represent something to them as opposed to the thematic representation of wife and children as an idea. They have gameplay meaning and by hurting them you're not just having a thematic impact on the other player – where they come home and see this awful scene – you're also legitimately doing a wrong. This is someone else in the real world, they have been working on this house for a week and they're going to come back and see you on the security tape just trashing it and feel hurt."

The focus for Rohrer is on more artistic problems, rather than mechanical gameplay ones. "Back in the early days of my game design career there seemed to be these very clear-cut unanswered questions. Like, how do we make something emotionally impactful using just gameplay mechanics? And that was sort of what Rod Humble was doing with The *Marriage*, and I was doing with *Passage*. But I felt some of those avenues just ran their course. I didn't want to keep making *Passage*-like games forever, and so then I started thinking bigger. What kind of area am I going to explore? And it wasn't necessarily so much about answering some unsolved question, as much as it was about making really interesting and thought-provoking, impactful work that was totally different from what I'd seen anyone do, and totally different from anything I'd done before."

Rohrer admits that the way he approaches game development has changed: "A lot of the older games I made were very much about starting with the thematic framework. Back in that time it was very literal, like 'What kind of game mechanics can exactly represent these dynamics that I see in my life?'. 'How can I directly represent emotional crashing, creative overextension and recuperating with family and so on directly in the mechanics?'"

As Rohrer's career continues, so too does his follow. Partly this is thanks to his games losing some of that stigma of 'pretentiousness', but also because of the ways his name finds its way to headlines. For GDC 2013's Game Design Challenge, he designed and produced a single board game, for example, which he then buried in a desert and provided a long list of codes for the internet to decipher. If that code is solved, then the board game can be found and played. With *The Castle Doctrine*, Rohrer drummed up interest by announcing he would return a percentage of money he earns from sales throughout the week up until the games launch to the players who earn the most in-game cash. And he did. But in spite of these intriguing concepts, Rohrer remains fairly unknown – especially when compared to the likes of Phil Fish and Jonathan Blow.

"It takes making one game," says Rohrer on the matter, "that lots and lots and lots of people really love to all of a sudden having this larger than life persona and this indie gaming god." For both Phil Fish and Jon Blow, their first was that game. "I've definitely not made a game like that yet," adds Rohrer, "and I don't know that I ever will." His belief is that games such as *Fez*, *Braid* and *Super Meat Boy* are reliant on content, and that gamers can clearly see the value there. "I think, should I be making a game like that? Should come out of my game designer's rat hole and actually make a content-filled game? Especially as my family have struggled in one way or another, financially. And so I'm like, before we can buy a house I need to make two or three more games; I've made 17 already and each one takes a year and a half to two years to make. So obviously making a bigger commercial game would solve those financial problems – potentially, anyway, it could also be a flop."

As the sole developer on his games, Rohrer has no greater costs outside of the expenses his family naturally incurs as part of their day-to-day life. While a larger project could bring in higher profits, it also means looking to take on other members of the development team – and not necessarily for the better. "Then I realised that I'm not thatgamecompany, I'm not going to make a game that's just a visual experience that doesn't really have a rich web of well-thought out game mechanics to it, you're just sort of there for the ride. Those kinds of games are important and good, right, but that's just not me," explains Rohrer, going on to add how players who have been involved with *The Castle Doctrine* for a year now are still playing, and – more to the point – *still* learning about its rich mechanics. "That's the kind of stuff that I'm really interesting in making," he adds, "and really putting my effort toward. And I'd rather feel like I'd make 17 of those as opposed to one *Fez*." Rohrer then laughs, adding that during the five years it took Phil Fish to make Fez "I realised like eight games or something like that."

Maybe one day Rohrer will make a game that just explodes, but it wouldn't be because Rohrer needed it to, or even wanted it to. "I have a pretty pleasant life, you know," Rohrer finishes. "I work for six hours a day and spend the rest of it with my wife and kids and do other things besides sit at a keyboard painting beautiful graphics for videogames." Something of a rarity in this industry, Rohrer creates games not for financial gain or for glory, but for the passion to learn and truly understand the medium that he works in.

Each of Rohrer's games share simplistic design principles.

IN THE MEDIA

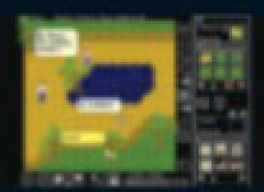
Jason Rohrer has made 17 games, but these are the six that have garnered the most coverage

PASSAGE 2007



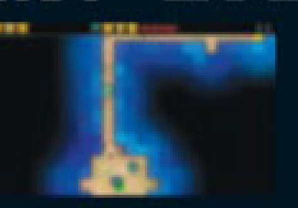
Though it was Rohrer's third game (preceded by *Transcend* and *Cultivation*), *Passage* was the one that got him noticed. Set in a 100x16 pixel window, *Passage* has you walking from left to right (and, occasionally, up and down) for five minutes as you and your partner slowly age. Its idea is obvious, here, touching on the feelings surrounding our passage through life.

GRAVITION 2008



His fourth game was a little more subtle about the meaning. By balancing the need to climb a tower and collect stars – i.e. work – with maintaining the happiness of who we presume to be the main character's child, depression sets in and – if you leave too often – the child will leave. Play it a second time and only entertain the child and you'll discover a happier ending.

SLEEP IS DEATH 2010

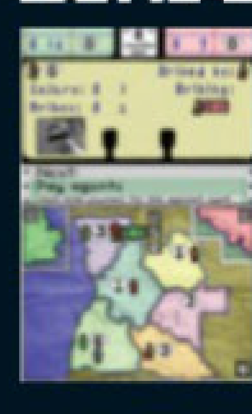


Perhaps the most interesting concept so far, Rohrer's seventh game brought an entirely original idea with it; two-player storytelling. Player one crafts an environment, while player two interacts with it. The result is an intriguing – and highly unique – means of telling a never-before told story.

INSIDE A STAR-FILLED SKY 2011

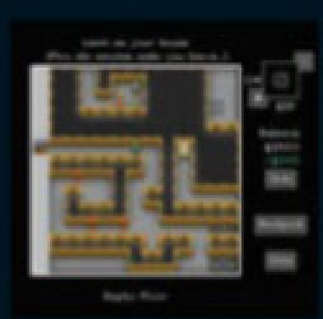
Rohrer's attempt to grasp the idea of infinity led to his eighth game, *Inside A Star-Filed Sky*. Here every item, enemy or object can be entered, procedurally creating a whole new level. Within that new level everything can, once again, be entered to reveal another. Thus, the game is infinite and cannot be completed.

DIAMOND TRUST OF LONDON 2012



After publisher worries caused DS game *Diamond Trust Of London* to fall through, Rohrer decided not to waste his efforts by using Kickstarter to find out if there was any interest in crowdfunders getting the game produced on cartridges. There was, it seems, and saw a batch of the multiplayer spy game made and sent out to fans.

THE CASTLE DOCTRINE 2014



Rohrer's latest is an MMO burglary game, where gamers must build and test their home defences to protect their family/money from other players, who can attempt to enter and steal. While it does gamify the subject matter heavily, it touches on the importance of security that Rohrer was feeling at the time.

DEATH OF THE MMO

FOR MMOS, THE PAST DECADE HAS BEEN ONE OF AN UNHEALTHY DOMINANCE BY A SINGLE TITLE, LEADING TO FAILED ENTERPRISES AND CREATIVE STAGNATION FROM EVERYONE LINGERING IN THE BEHEMOTH'S SHADOW. BUT AS WORLD OF WARCRAFT STARTS FEELING ITS AGE, WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE THE GENRE'S FUTURE?

The end is nigh. For years those that competed within the massively-multiplayer online arena carved themselves in the image of *World Of Warcraft* but few found themselves establishing a similar legacy. Since its launch in 2004, *World Of Warcraft* quickly came to be seen as the template by which all MMOs must adhere to and if you even tried to innovate or be different, you were almost guaranteed to fail. The landscape is littered with the corpses of those that tried in vain to compete (*Star Wars Galaxies*, *City Of Heroes*, *Warhammer Online*), and those that didn't even make it out of the starting blocks (*Lego Universe*, *Tabula Rasa*). A few brave souls such as *Eve Online*, *PlanetSide* or *Guild Wars* made their differences pay off. But for the most part, if you weren't *WOW*, no one cared.

Even stone giants start to crack, however. Over the past couple of years, there's been a sense that the MMO genre is ready for a seismic shift away from Azeroth. An abundance of free-to-play titles have seen their audiences grow, and when big name single-player experts such as Bethesda start to try their luck in the field you can't help but wonder if it's finally time for a new wave of titles to try and shake everything up a bit. Could the days of the

traditional MMO be over? The company that perhaps has the most to gain from this new movement is Sony Online Entertainment, developer of the original *EverQuest* series and, for a while, the closest thing Blizzard had to a competitor with *EverQuest II* (until that too fell to WOW's sword and became a shadow of its former self). *EverQuest Next* is an attempt to explore what a mixture of fantasy RPG and player-created content can offer an audience with a forward-facing outlook. It's also an attempt to solve a problem unique to MMO development that executive producer at SOE, Clint Worley, fully admits the company (and others) had to learn the hard way.

"A chunk of content that takes us four years to make gets consumed by the players in less than a year," he says. "So we get into a situation where we're chasing our tail. We're trying to create new content for the players, but even with a dedicated team of, say, a hundred developers cranking out an expansion or an add-on – the players consume it so fast. From a business point of view it really puts us on our heels because we can't create content fast enough, while the players can just go to a different game any time they want."

The key to resolving this, Worley suggests, is to provide players with the ability to make their own content. It worked for *Minecraft*, why not in an MMO? "With *EverQuest Next* and *Landmark* the gameplay is starting to be more about the players using their own imaginations and the tools we give them as opposed to us reading them a story and them having to do what we tell them," he explains. "I think we'll continue to see more of that going forward. Just from a business standpoint it makes a lot more sense."



"A CHUNK OF CONTENT THAT TAKES US FOUR YEARS TO MAKE GETS CONSUMED BY THE PLAYERS IN LESS THAN A YEAR. SO WE GET INTO A SITUATION WHERE WE'RE CHASING OUR TAIL"

CLINT WORLEY, SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT



● ***WildStar*** **is hoping that a mixture of established MMO staples polished to the ultimate degree and mixed with a few new ideas will be enough to garner a loyal audience.**

It's not the only solution, though. One title looking less to reinvent the online wheel, but more to evolve what already works to a logical conclusion is *WildStar*, a game that has its development roots in *WOW*, coming from a team that departed Blizzard to set up on their own. For Jeremy Gaffney, executive producer at *WildStar* developer Carbine Studios, too often players just don't react well to being given total freedom and quickly revert to tried-and-tested gaming staples: "When I used to play [the original] *EverQuest*, I played one particular dungeon a lot. Normally you'd go in and camp one boss and farm it for its 'Flowing Black Silk Sash' or whatever loot it was going to drop. It was boring, but it was efficient. But one time I was like 'We're going to adventure through the whole dungeon!' and our group fought from room to room. We fought each boss, we died a ton and we fought our way through the whole thing – which was what those designers intended – and we had a blast! Then the next day we went back to the room with the boss with the black silk sash and we camped the thing again for four damned hours because we wanted our damned silk sash, even »



● **SOE's hope for** ***EverQuest Next*** **is that a world that is shaped directly by players will have more lasting appeal than one rigidly carved out in advance.**

● **Bungie is loathe to call** ***Destiny*** **an MMOG, but it is in many ways an evolution of the genre that** ***WOW*** **is part of.**

● *Guild Wars*' great innovation was in doing away with subscriptions altogether.



"SANDBOX-STYLE GAMEPLAY IS VERY INTERESTING BECAUSE ANYTHING YOU CAN DO THAT IS NEW CAN GET ATTENTION. BUT IT'S GOT TO BE SOLID. NEW ATTRACTS YOU IN, BUT SOLID KEEPS YOU THERE FOR THE LONG HAUL"

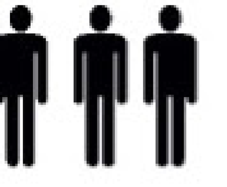
JEREMY GAFFNEY, CARBINE STUDIOS

» though we'd had so much fun playing like adventurers. People do what's efficient, not always what's fun." The key lies in finding content that not only seems attractive enough to bring players into your world, but is compelling enough to keep them there once they've seen and experienced it. *WildStar*'s creative team is striving to get just the right mixture of new ideas and established tropes. "Our Warplots system is going to be pretty awesome for us because having a brand new style of gameplay is cool," says Gaffney of one the game's key features. "Mixing very large-scale city building with PvP is a cool enough idea to attract attention. Sandbox-style gameplay is very interesting to people because anything you can do that is new can get attention. But it's got to be solid, it's got to be polished on top of just being new. New attracts you in, but solid keeps you there for the long haul."

It's the very difference in its approach to MMO gameplay that is causing a lot of people to keep a very close eye on what happens to *EverQuest Next*, even if it doesn't directly affect what they do themselves. "I think everybody's paying attention but nobody's reacting very much," admits Gaffney. "You've got to have your own vision and stick to it. We're all very intrigued [by *EQN*] because it's so expensive and takes so long to make these games that the generational gap in MMOs is five or six years. You take the learning from one era and move it on to the next. That's very much not the case in things like first-person shooters or in low-content games like MOBAs where you see so many of them all the time. With this generational gap, everybody looks at whatever is coming out and asks 'Is this going to be the next big thing?' Whoever gets that is going to make a billion dollars." So where does the genre go from here, now that the majority of MMOs as we know them prove unviable in the long term?



● Matt Higby, creative director of *PlanetSide 2*, believes more games will be given MMO treatment



Even though presently the numbers are still with *WOW*'s model, it does feel as though creatively a plateau has been reached there. *WOW* certainly isn't dying any time soon, despite its subscription-based structure facing increasing competition from the unnerving rise of so many free-to-play titles is skewing the market in a way that enough people are looking for something better to make riskier ventures like *EQN* worth a shot.

"I think the biggest thing we'll see is an expansion of the types of games that are given the MMO treatment," speculates Matt Higby, SOE's creative director on MMO team-based shooter *PlanetSide 2*. "We still haven't really seen an MMO RTS game or an MMO flight sim. I think there's a lot of room out there for making more types of online games, both pseudo-MMOs where you have a whole bunch of people connecting through a lobby system, and shared world MMOs with thousands and thousands of players on them. Some of these games that we see coming out that are hybrids of those types, like *The Division* and *The Crew* look really exciting. *Destiny* has the same kind of vibe – a shared experience that grows out of a single-player experience and it's that hybrid approach that I think we're going to see more and more of in the future." Worley feels the

● **TOP RIGHT:** *PlanetSide 2*'s key pull is that the players dictate when and where the action takes place, making each time you log on a new experience. **BELOW LEFT:** Sony tried hard to move *Star Wars Galaxies* closer to the *WOW* template and it did no-one, least of all the game, any favours.

same: that the genre is changing to become less about what we're used to and more about what can be done. "The genre is maturing and adapting," he says. "Back in the day, players didn't have a lot of options so they would go with what they had in front of them. Now there are just so many that everybody's having to change it up. Those preconceived notions of what an MMO is are starting to break down very quickly."

For Gaffney, the online future is less to do with the kind of gameplay we have and more to do with the way we and others experience it: "I think one of the things that you can look at as having made a difference is what's happening on Twitch and with streaming. You have to think that the spectatorship aspect is a factor. I can imagine seeing games that embrace that to their very core being in the next round of titles – where it's a fundamental part of the gameplay or of the experience. It's just been an add-on for most games to date."

But perhaps the biggest change facing the genre in the near future is something that has nothing to do with the actual games being played, but more to do with their perception. For the most part, it comes down to the genre having grown more pervasive and conceptually engaging. MMOs were traditionally always seen as a particularly inscrutable sub-aspect of an already nerdy culture. Today, the picture is changing. Both the genre and the audience is maturing. "People have grown up with it now so it's no longer that weird thing that your kids do. It's that weird thing that you do while your kids are now on to some other crazy thing," laughs Gaffney. "You see that in the industry as well, a tendency to make things easier because people who used to spend forty hours a week playing, now only have eight because they have kids. Maybe the next evolution will be when you start paying your kid their allowance because they farmed enough gold for you in-game."



"THE GENRE IS MATURING AND ADAPTING… THERE ARE JUST SO MANY MMOS THAT EVERYBODY'S HAVING TO CHANGE IT UP"

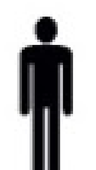
CLINT WORLEY, SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT

THE NUMBERS GAME

Just how big is the potential audience for a non-WOW MMO? Bigger than you might think...

It's strange that we now exist in a time when *World Of Warcraft* isn't automatically held up as the benchmark for how to move forward in the genre, even if Blizzard's audience figures still dwarf any other title by miles. There is a catch to those numbers however, and it's one that canny MMO rivals such as Gaffney and SOE could find themselves taking full advantage of. The theory runs that in the MMO business, even a giant in the arena like *WOW* churns about five percent of its users every month. So with a game that has a couple of million people in it, every twenty months or so everybody's left and been replaced by new players. "It's like the human body," explains Gaffney. "Theoretically every cell in your body dies every seven years so you become a different person than you were seven years ago."

What that means is that there's always potentially a couple of million people who have played an MMO, become bored of that particular world and are looking for something new. Held up as proof of this are the numbers that the many free-to-play titles boast. "I'd say you've seen a lot of iffy games doing some pretty big numbers and that says there's an interest in the market," surmises Gaffney, "but you need to be so switched on with the game you offer them as an alternative. If you don't have fun levelling, people are going to leave. If everyone levels up and gets to cap saying 'That was a fun game!' but then there's nothing more to do, they leave." It's a theory that seems to be paying off for Carbine, with over 1.5 million players signing up for *WildStar*'s beta tests alone.





CREEPING SUCCESS

CELEBRATING 5 YEARS OF MINECRAFT

"IT'S HARD TO REMEMBER WHAT LIFE WAS LIKE BEFORE MINECRAFT CAME ALONG AND THE CONCEPT OF THE SURVIVAL SANDBOX BECAME INSTANTLY FAMILIAR AND NECESSARY"



CAN YOU BELIEVE IT'S BEEN FIVE YEARS SINCE THE FIRST VERSION OF MINECRAFT CREPT OUT ACROSS THE WORLD AND CHANGED THE FACE OF GAMING FOREVER? WE SIT DOWN WITH THE GAME'S LEAD DESIGNER TO CELEBRATE MOJANG'S BLOCKY MILESTONE, BEFORE CHIPPING AWAY AT IT TO REVEAL WHAT FUTURE SECRETS ARE HIDDEN WITHIN

Many years from now, when we're recounting our long and distinguished gaming careers to a gaggle of enraptured grandchildren (agog that humans once stared into flat screens, pressed buttons and required legs), we will inevitably recall our encounters in *Minecraft*, a gaming phenomenon that has just reached the stately age of five – and in all likelihood will reach fifty before many of us stop to realise where the time has gone.

As easy as it is to wonder at the kinds of games those cherubic future faces will get to enjoy when our own hands are too gnarled to hold a gamepad, it's almost as hard to remember what life was like before *Minecraft* came along and the concept of the survival sandbox became as instantly familiar and as necessary a part of the gaming landscape as voxels and alpha-funding. Much easier instead to recall when we first played it, where and with whom.

For Jens Bergensten, known to millions simply as Jeb on account of his current position as *Minecraft*'s lead designer and chief developer, the first encounter with the simmering phenomenon was during the summer of 2009 at home in his native Sweden. *Minecraft* fever hadn't quite taken hold, the game having only been released in pre-alpha form two months earlier. Instead, there was a nasty case of swine flu doing the rounds, as well as the matter of a sudden and seemingly apocalyptic global financial collapse taking place. In short, it wasn't looking too good for Earth's dominant lifeform. Luckily for Bergensten, who'd contracted H1N1/09 via a friend who'd just returned from panic-struck California, the cure to his aches and pains presented itself as a full course of block building, to be administered continuously throughout the day. "We were playing *Minecraft* together," he recalls of his days off work with his infected friend. "Building bigger and bigger pyramids, and suffering from feverish *Minecraft* nightmares due to the illness." Inevitably, the pre-alpha block game worked its magic. Unfortunately the side effect, a somewhat unique *Minecraft* affiliation, has remained with him since.

Previous to that first disease-ridden encounter with Markus 'Notch' Perrson's nascent building game, Bergensten worked for Oblivion Entertainment and Starbreeze before enjoying some success - critical rather than commercial - as the co-founder of Oxeye Game Studio, releasing minor strategy indie hit *Harvest: Massive Encounter* in 2008. Perrson was himself well established, having worked on the relatively obscure MMOG *Wurm Online* before joining *Candy Crash Saga* creator King.com in the not unreasonable hope of making a living. It was in his spare time while developing various ideas inspired by the likes of *Dwarf Fortress* and *Dungeon* »

Keeper that Perrson chanced across a promising multiplayer block-building game called *Infiniminer* (the creator of which would go on to develop *SpaceChem*) and Perrson realised at once that this was the kind of game he wanted to make. "I played [*Infiniminer*] in multiplayer for a while and had a blast, but found it flawed," he later recalled. "Building was fun, but there wasn't enough variation. I thought a fantasy game in that style would work really, really well, so I tried to implement a simple first-person engine in that style." Perrson released footage and code of his efforts, *Cave Game* test, on 17 May 2009, promising the final game "will have more resource management and materials, if I ever get around to finishing it." The response to Perrson's *Infiniminer* clone was, of course, immediate and positive and Perrson quickly decided to develop the game further. And so, over the course of a summer in which swine flu threatened to engulf the world, *Minecraft* started to take shape and threaten a more lasting and disruptive gaming pandemic instead.

In September 2010 with around 200,000 copies sold, a healthy PayPal balance and no employer to appease, Perrson announced the formation of Mojang, bringing in his best friend Jakob Porsér who immediately and secretly set to work on Mojang's second game, *Scrolls*. Despite issues with PayPal freezing Mojang's account, (PayPal's automated systems were alerted to the thousands of dollars amassing in the account every day), the pair were joined by business brain Daniel Kaplan, with art director Markus 'Junkboy' Toivonen and Bergensten – now fully recovered - completing the team in December. Bergensten introduced himself humbly as a server programmer, hoping to "get the chance to improve *Minecraft*" over the months ahead. Little did he or the team know just how much bigger the game would become or how his influence upon its development would grow.

Within a year of Mojang's inception the team was up to 12 bodies and things were moving fast. In January 2011 beta v1.2 introduced birch and pine trees, dispensers, note blocks and cake. Beds and Redstone Repeaters came in 1.3, weather in 1.5, pistons in 1.7, then the massive Adventure Update came in v1.8, with NPC villages, new biomes, a food meter and the iconic Endermen. *Minecraft* was at last becoming the game Perrson envisaged, an RPG evolution of *Infiniminer*. Perrson revealed his pleasure at how the game was shaping up with a blog post during development, revealing "What we've got on our hands now is somewhere in between a finished Adventure Mode update and a version of the game we'd be proud to call just *Minecraft*. Not *Minecraft Beta* or '*Minecraft Alpha*', but just plain and simple *Minecraft*."

By this time *Pocket Edition* had been tentatively released and was taking App and Play Stores by storm, while it was revealed that PC *Minecraft* had sold almost four million copies as the successful beta phase drew to a close. With deals in place to release the game across consoles and with an oversubscribed inaugural MineCon planned to launch v1.0 of the game in Las Vegas, *Minecraft* had become a seemingly unstoppable force. As had Persson who, within days of *Minecraft*'s release, announced he would be handing over the *Minecraft* reigns to Bergensten, saying: "We've been working together on *Minecraft* for a year now, and I'm amazed at how much in sync we two are when it comes to how to design the game. And when we don't agree, we discuss it and something much better comes out at a result. He's truly a great person to work with, and I feel very confident handing over the leadership of *Minecraft* to him."

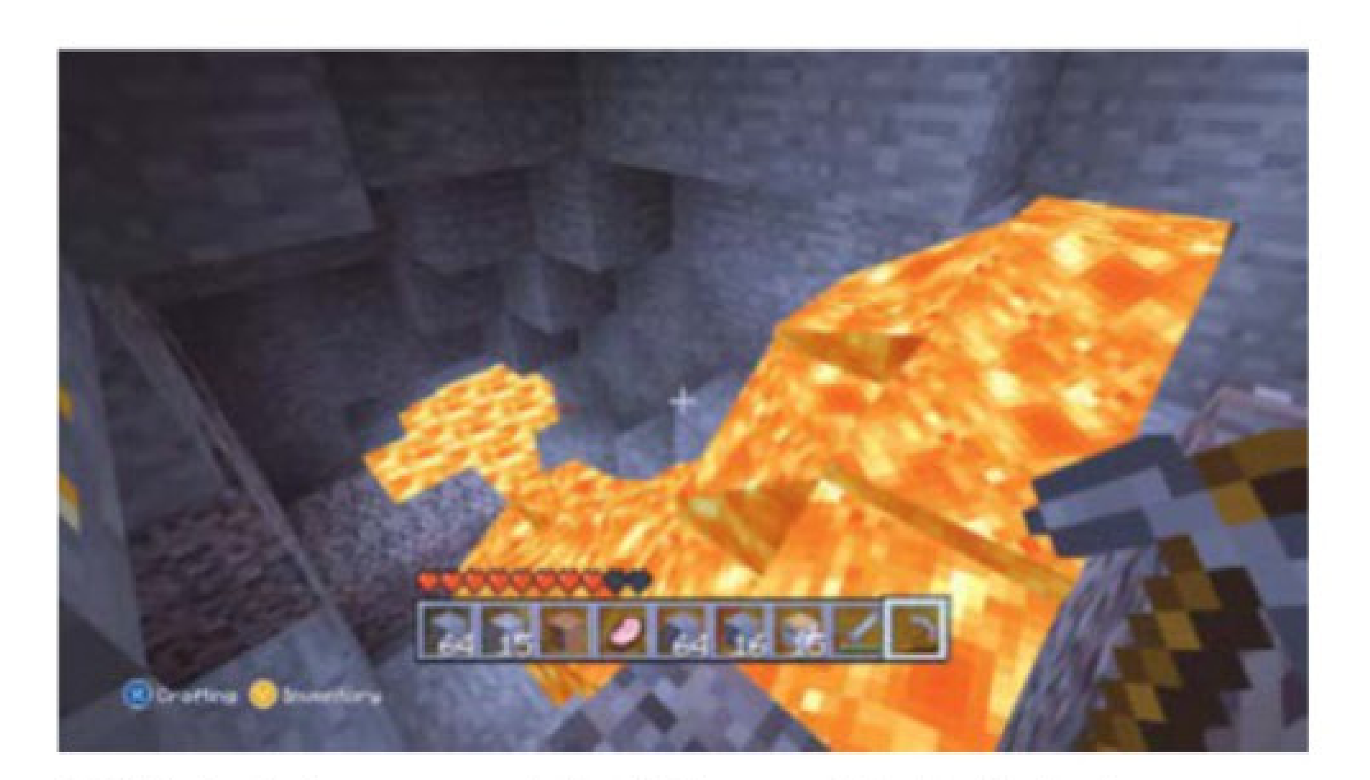
"I PLAYED [INFIRMINER] IN MULTIPLAYER AND HAD A BLAST, BUT FOUND IT FLAWED. BUILDING WAS FUN, BUT THERE WASN'T ENOUGH VARIATION. I THOUGHT A FANTASY GAME WOULD WORK"

Jens Bergensten has been running the *Minecraft* show, with Perrson as his occasional wingman (in between other flights of coding fancy), for almost two and a half years now – not quite as long as Notch was in the captain's chair.

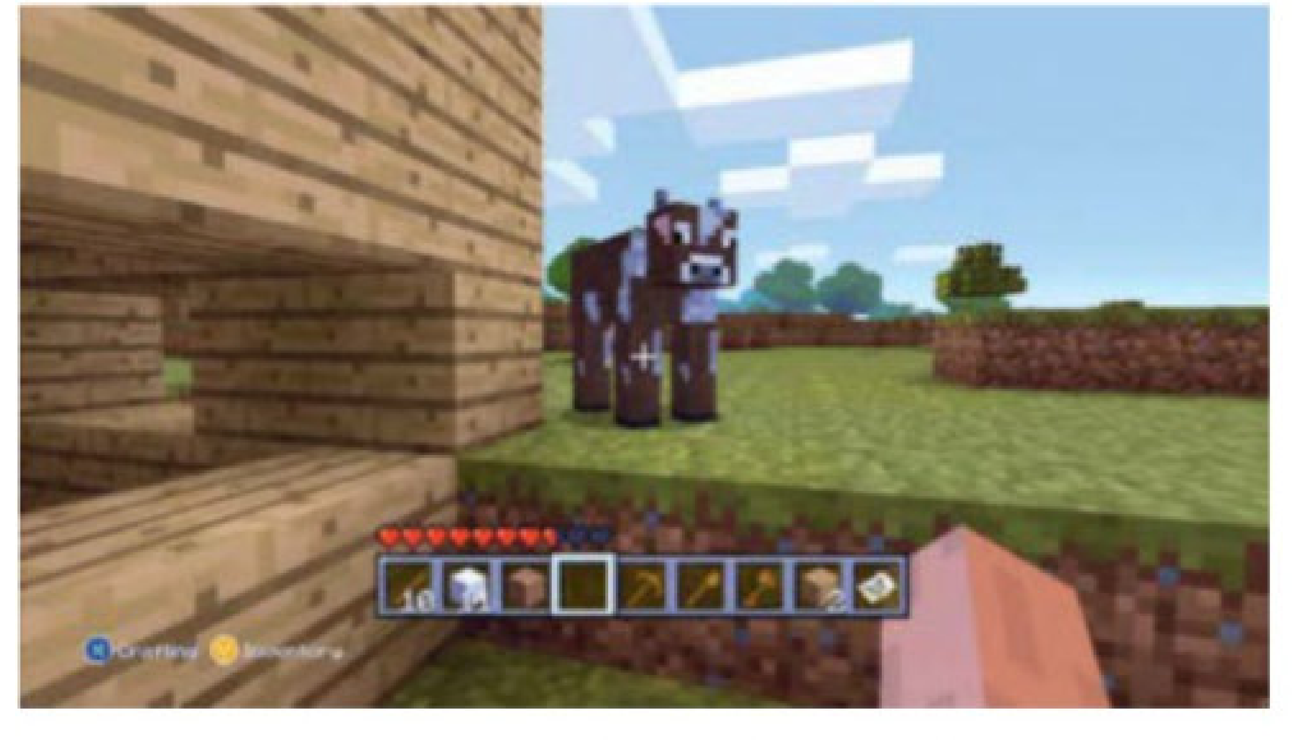
"I haven't really thought about it," replies Bergensten when asked on whether the fifth birthday of *Minecraft* holds any significance for him. "I guess it's unusual for a game to still attract new players so long after its conception."

Indeed it is, and that's true of a developer sticking with a project for so long through its lifetime, continuing to refine its content long after it has been released. Mojang has garnered a reputation for its laidback and egalitarian structure (second only to Valve's flat management in notoriety). Bergensten admits that this has at least enabled him to stave off *Minecraft* exhaustion, turning his attention to the other works: "I always feel fatigue when working on the same thing for a long time," he says. "But thankfully I can help out with other projects at Mojang too. Designing game rules for *Scrolls* is particularly fun. I think *Scrolls* is a great game and I love working on it, and I think people have understood that there's no point for us to do another *Minecraft* game"

That's especially true considering the raft of imitators that have appeared since Mojang's debut went from a modest hit to a phenomenon. So pervasive have its graphical style and gameplay systems become that barely a new game is announced that hasn't in some way benefited from *Minecraft* – be it the many clones that have infested the Xbox indie marketplace, such as *FortressCraft* and *CastleMiner* (which Bergensten criticised, saying "It's easy to think that you can make a *Minecraft* with extra elements added on to it. It can easily turn into trying to make two games at once"), to more accomplished games like *Terraria* and *Starbound* that are success stories in their own right. Without *Minecraft* it's hard to imagine *Terraria* coming into being, and



■ While Notch has announced that Mojang won't be developing its own Oculus-compatible mod of Minecraft, the community has already been hard at work creating its own version of the game that can support VR.



■ Bergensten doesn't have any coding regrets – he simply changes any mistakes in updates, such is the rapidly evolving nature of Minecraft.



BUILDING BLOCKS OF SUCCESS

A TIMELINE OF MINECRAFT'S INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

May 17, 2009
First public release

Jun 28, 2010
Minecraft Alpha released

Sep 17, 2010
Full-scale Enterprise-D build in *Minecraft*

Oct 16, 2010
Mojang founded

Nov 10, 2010
16-bit CPU created in *Minecraft*

Dec 20, 2010
Minecraft Beta released

Y Jan 12, 2011
1m PC copies sold

Mar 2, 2011
Mojang announces *Scrolls*

Oct 7, 2011
Android version released

Nov 6, 2011
4m PC copies sold

Nov 17, 2011
iOS *Pocket Edition* released

Nov 18, 2011
Minecraft v1.0 full release, MineCon 2011

Dec 1, 2011
Jens Bergensten takes over as lead developer

Mar 1, 2012
v1.2 (PC) introduces 256 map height limit, jungle, cats

Apr 4, 2012
Mojang announces *0x10c*

May 9, 2012
Xbox 360 Edition released

Jun 6, 2012
Lego *Minecraft* set released

Oct 25, 2012
v1.4.2 (PC) – The Pretty Scary Update

Nov 24 2012
MineCon 2012

Mar 13, 2013
v1.5 (PC) – The Redstone Update

Jun 3, 2013
Scrolls open beta release

Jun 25, 2013
v1.6 (PC) – The Horse Update

Oct 22, 2013
v1.7.2 (PC) – The Update That Changed The World

Nov 2, 2013
MineCon 2013

Dec 17, 2013
PS3 Edition released, 16.5m *Pocket Edition* copies sold

Jan 24, 2014
1m PS3 Edition copies sold

Feb 3, 2014
14m PC copies sold

Mar 25, 2014
VR Edition cancelled

Apr 4, 2014
12m Xbox 360 Edition copies sold

May 2014
v1.8 (PC) released

■ *Minecraft* has been used to created scaled versions of popular fictional objects and locations. You can find the USS Enterprise, the Death Star, Westeros and Middle-earth all re-created in blocky glory within the game.

The studio's next game, *0x10c*, has been indefinitely shelved by Notch due to a creative block. Outside of its science-fiction setting, little else is known about the title.

"WHEN IT CAME TO CONSOLE VERSION I THINK EVERYONE UNDERESTIMATED THE SUCCESS, BECAUSE WE'VE BEATEN MICROSOFT'S LIFETIME PREDICTION BY OVER 100 PER CENT"

» while perhaps the links are less obvious between *Minecraft* and recent games like *Don't Starve*, *DayZ* and *Rust*, their developers happily recognise Mojang's efforts in establishing the emergent gameplay systems allowed by creative sandbox tools and open world survival. Jamie Cheng, founder of Klei Entertainment, when announcing *Don't Starve* said: "We were inspired by building games like *Minecraft* and *Terraria*, as well as simulation games like *Dwarf Fortress*. Add in a splash of old-school adventure gaming and a hint of roguelike, and you have an idea of what we were going for. Beyond a playground that *Minecraft* offers, we wanted to build a rich world that interacts in surprising ways and challenges the player to explore and understand it."

Less talked about is how *Minecraft* helped established alpha-funding as a means for independent developers to attract the investment necessary to advance their games. While it's perhaps stretching the truth to say that were it not for *Minecraft*, there might not be a Kickstarter or Steam Early Access, but it's undeniable that thanks to Mojang millions of gamers have become accustomed to gambling on games that are far from finished and investing in features that might barely exist on a developer's sticky note.

It's one in a long list of accolades and milestones that *Minecraft* has achieved across its half-decade of steady world domination. Having appeared on various platforms over the years and been presented as paradigm of creative ingenuity, the biggest surprise is that it *continues* to surprise even its makers. "I must admit I greatly underestimated the success of *Pocket Edition*," enthuses Bergensten when he reflects back on *Minecraft*'s quite miraculous journey. "When we started working on it we put our ambitions way too low, only offering a very limited creative mode experience. This is something we are paying for now, in the sense of tired typing fingers. When it came to the console versions I think everyone underestimated the success, because we've beaten Microsoft's lifetime prediction by over 100 per cent."

And it's not even done with consoles yet. With next-gen *Minecraft* on the horizon for PlayStation 4, there's no sign of things slowing down anytime soon. "Oh, we don't have any 'PC master race' pride here," he laughs. "We want to make the best game possible, and the editions have slightly different goals. We know players get very upset when *their* edition lacks certain features, but for us it's more important that the editions don't slow each other down." And as for new features present in the upcoming next-gen releases? "I can say that the worlds will be larger!"

But perhaps the most positive impact that *Minecraft* can lay claim to across its five-year global dominance is the amazing contribution it has made to education. Today it is used across the world as a tool to teach a variety of subjects – from physics to geography and even English language. "It kind of happened on its own," states Bergensten. "We're very happy about it, as it makes people take us, and gaming in general, more seriously. However, we want to focus on game development, but try to help projects that use *Minecraft* in education or similar."

Bergensten is being humble, downplaying the game's importance beyond just offering virtual escapism to millions of users. It has spawned education foundations, merchandise and even its own annual convention. It has exploded into popular culture in a manner that's rare for any entertainment product, let alone a videogame (you know it's big when *The Simpsons* have aired a *Minecraft*-themed couch gag) and its accolades continue to swell alongside its push into other mediums.

But while it will no doubt sustain due to its evergreen premise, there's still a question lingering over its future: is *Minecraft* content to continue on as it is today, or will Mojang push it forward into new frontiers? Reassuringly, there's a plan. "Full mod API, a quest system, player-constructed world elements sharing à la *Spore*, portals between player worlds, maybe?" is Bergensten's matter-of-fact response as to how he sees the game evolving given another five years of success. But can Mojang imagine a time in the future when it can declare *Minecraft* complete, that there's no more that can be added? "Not really," Bergensten replies. "But I expect the modding community to carry the torch in the future."

It seems fair to say, then that *Minecraft* will continue to burn bright for a very long time to come.



MINECRAFT ABANDONS VR?

MOJANG ADDRESSES RECENT COMMENTS

After the Facebook acquisition of Oculus Rift, Notch himself announced that Mojang would be abandoning its upcoming Oculus-compatible edition of *Minecraft*. We ask the game's lead designer, Jens Bergensten, whether VR is still an option the studio is looking to pursue. "I'm not personally interested in a VR edition, so it's a question for the modding community and/or Sony," is Bergensten's curt response. "I guess the problem right now is to run the game at a stable FPS at 4k resolution. Conceptually, Minecraft already works on the Oculus Rift." If Mojang is still planning on developing its own VR version, it doesn't look like it's arriving soon.

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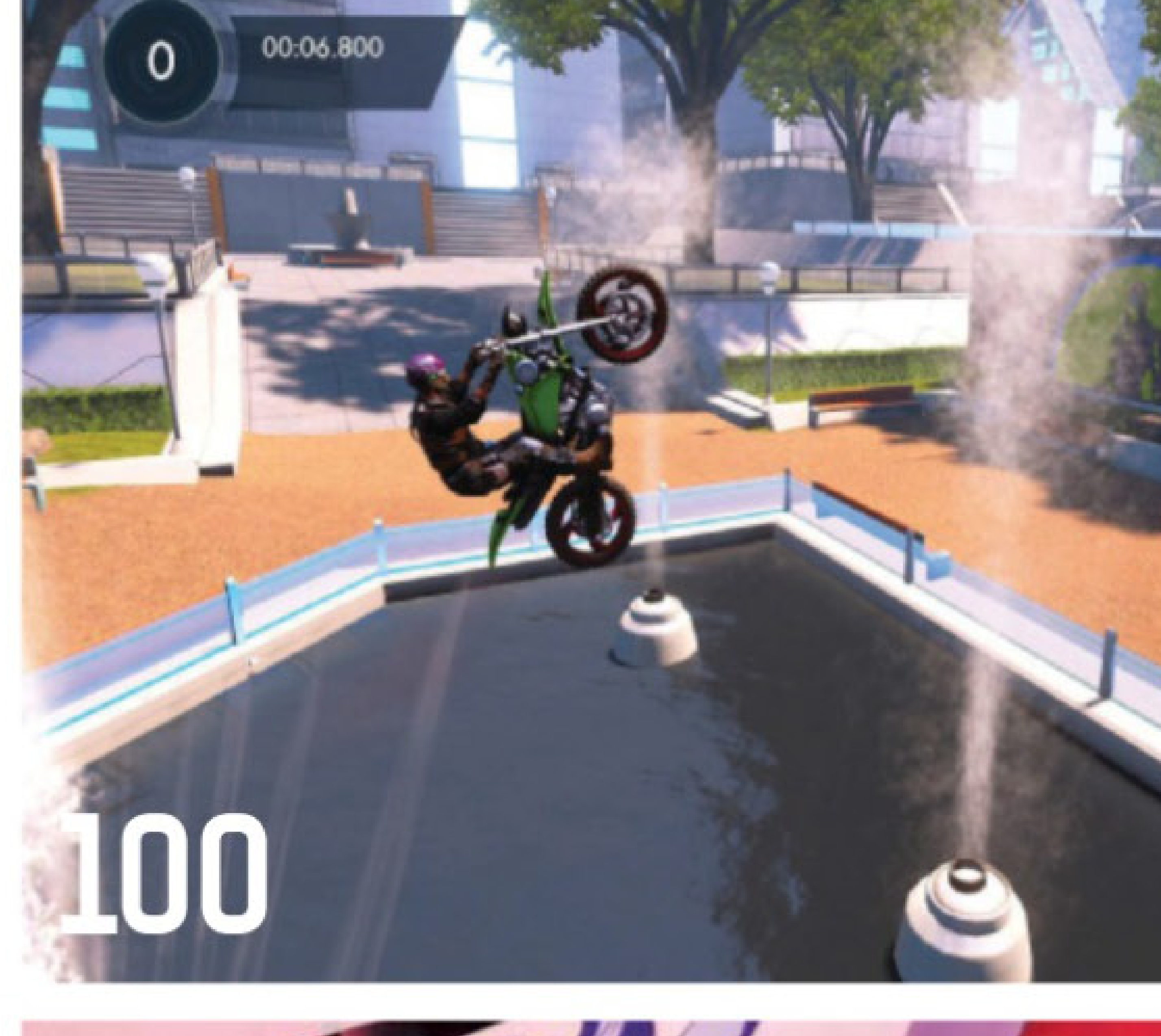
MARIO KART 8

Does Nintendo's latest kart racer have what it takes to get the Wii U back on track?



THE AVERAGE

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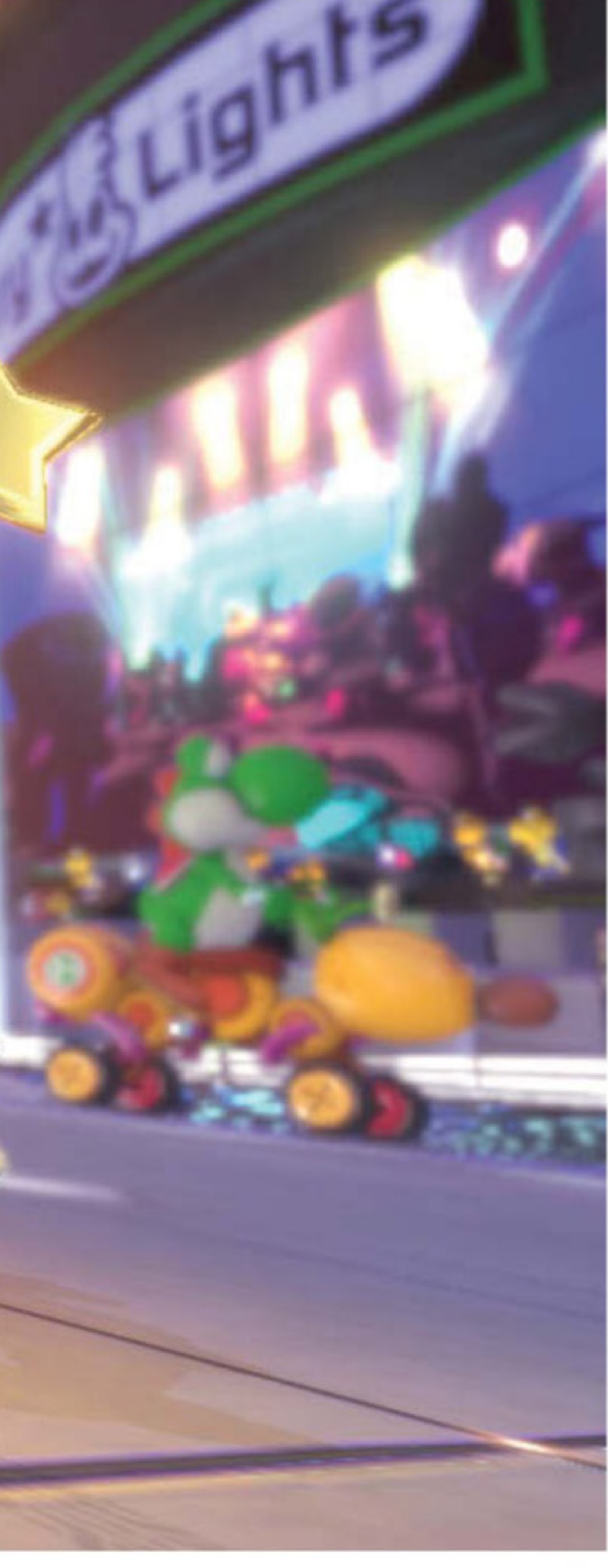

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IN A GENRE AS DEFINED BY ITS CONVENTIONS AND RULES AS A KART RACER, THE DETAILS SPEAK LOUDER THAN BROAD STROKES

LOVE HANDLING

The first thing we noticed about *Mario Kart 8* is the handling – this is a much more hardcore-felling game than its forbears. Because the majority of the control is done with the Wii U tablet's analogue stick (the motion controls are awful, stay away), the game has a degree of precision to it that the Wii version didn't. This, in turn, creates a game where you have to think about the line you're taking into corners, and the length you give to your power slides – if you don't master these, you're going to get destroyed by even the AI, even on 100cc difficulty. It's a quick learning curve, but you'll noticed the game is heavier to handle than previous *Mario Kart* games – a marked improvement, in our eyes.





WHY SHELL OUT AGAIN?

Mario Kart 8

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Nintendo EAD
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: 30 May
PLAYERS: 1-4 (local) 2-12 (online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

There has been a resurgence in kart racers lately. There used to be a time when the humble kart racer was the last throw of a franchise that wanted to expand its IP, saturate the market, capitalise on the fanbase. *Chocobo Racing*, *Crash Team Racing*, *Jak X*, *Diddy Kong Racing* – many franchises head down the kart route to assure they stay relevant in the minds of the ever-growing gaming audiences. But one series has always stood out – always championed the genre where others have ridiculed it: *Mario Kart*.

There seems to be a cynicism around *Mario Kart* – with new releases, internet commentators and forums erupt with a sceptical 'Oh, another *Mario Kart* game' tonality, an unfair reflection on a franchise that's always keen on pushing the hardware it sees a release on. There's a misconception that *Mario Kart* games over-saturate Nintendo hardware; the reality is, there's one *Mario Kart* game per console, either handheld or home-based. This allows Nintendo's EAD team to really extract the most from the hardware it's working with, easily incorporating every feature or gimmick the specific console has to offer into each release, making them feel relevant and fresh on every release.

Mario Kart 8 is a welcomed continuation of this trend. The Wii U has had its fair share of criticism lately, but *Mario Kart 8* extracts every ounce of power from the machine, and as such presents the eight console instalment of the franchise as a marked improvement from its Wii forebear. The focus this time is clearly on presentation – the 3D visuals are polished and crisp, every track alive and vibrant with colour palettes that put the majority of earthy-neutral triple-A console releases to shame. Rainbow Road's *Mario Kart 8* incarnation, for example, is a space station floating in the utter blackness of Earth's orbit, its translucent rainbow opulence a beautiful contrast to the emptiness around you. Where,

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

FLYING HIGH The anti-gravity sections of each track make new courses fun, and add enough to the recurring circuits to make them feel fresh.

Left: The replay editor in-game is most reminiscent of *Halo*'s Forge, oddly; the UI is responsive and accessible, and slowing down the playback to see Luigi's face as he gets pelted with a shell is nothing short of priceless.



Left: The Thwomp Ruins have the potential to be a classic – the big drop right at the end of the track get be tense if the race is neck-and-neck.



Left: The old Rainbow Road makes its inevitable return in style, with everything gilded with this gorgeous gold lining. The neon lights exploding everywhere and the business of the ambiance proves how powerful the latent power of the Wii U has been all along.

previously, Rainbow Road was just a collection of paths set in a vacuum because, well, 'that makes it harder', the developer seems to have given every circuit and course a context (which couldn't have been too hard, considering the rate at which the *Mario* universe is expanding at the moment). There are references to *Luigi's Mansion*, the wider *Donkey Kong* universe, *Mario 3D World* – you name a Nintendo property tied to Mario, and it's in there, somewhere. It gives the game a sense of cohesion and completion; the visual language of which is appealing and bright enough for kids, yet engaging and secret-ridden enough for nostalgia enthusiasts.

You can play through a Grand Prix over and over again, each time clocking little extras and details that you'd missed before. The animations of each character are individual and relevant to their established character in the *Mario* universe, too – that sounds like a small thing, but in a genre as defined by its conventions and rules as a kart racer, the details speak louder than broad strokes. Take, for example, the remastered routes seen from old *Mario Kart* games – as is now tradition, courses from the GBA, N64, DS and Wii games all make an appearance. The Wii U has the capability to extract the most from the high definition, cartoony 3D that *Mario Kart 8* has taken as its art direction, re-designing and re-validating the retro courses for a modern console, managing to keep them nostalgically satisfying, yet fresh and new enough to be exciting, all at once.

The upgrades that come courtesy of the Wii U don't just focus on the visuals, though. They're also granted by the mechanics of the game, specifically in the gravity-lead conceit the game focuses on. We were dubious, at first, about the inclusion of anti-gravity – would it just be another farcical gimmick introduced to create an illusion of depth and complexity? Would it make the game feel over-encumbered, considering its place alongside the gliding sections and underwater sections it sits beside? The answer: a resounding 'no'. The anti-grav sections *work*, and not only that, they instil the game with a dynamism that its predecessor on the Wii was sorely lacking.

Traditionally, *Mario Kart* would see you avoiding collisions with your foes at all costs (unless you've got a trio of shells circling you, in which case – bash away!). A bump against a competitor would throw you both off course, slow you down and potentially derail you straight into a yawning abyss at the side of a track. During the anti-grav sections though, you'll find yourself bottlenecking into a tight cluster of racers, keen to jostle your way to dominance by bounding off enemy racers, activating the speed boost that comes from physical contact. We managed to get some local multiplayer going during our review of the game (it's the way *Mario Kart* should be played, right?) and discovered that the anti-grav sections of a race can really upset the balance and positions of everyone on the track. Say you've got some momentum going – you're rocketing along Cloudtop Cruise (a

FAQs

Q. WILL THE MUSIC STICK IN MY HEAD?
This is the first *Mario Kart* that uses real, recorded instruments. You'll be humming the Bowser's Castle guitar parts for years to come.

Q. ANY FUTURE CLASSIC TRACKS?
Keep an eye on Cloudtop Cruise – it's a nifty little course with tight corners leading to wide, slide-heavy expanses. We love it.

Q WILL I BE PLAYING IT FOR A WHILE?
There are 90 stickers to collect, hundreds of customisations to unlock and eight cups to beat on three difficulties.



Right: The anti-gravity sections are never disorientating, and neither do they feel crowbarred in; the whole conceit is a perfectly natural fit in the *Mario Kart* formula.



Above: If you hit hop as you go over a jump, you get a speed boost. Hit the directional buttons simultaneously, and you'll get a bigger boost – Rosalina's stunt jumps are the best.

THE ANTI-GRAVITY SECTIONS INSTIL THE GAME WITH A DYNAMISM THAT ITS PREDECESSOR ON THE WII WAS SORELY LACKING

Below: The difference between karts and bikes feels even more pronounced than it ever did, now. Bikes are nippy, but are clumsier on the slide – suitable if you prefer hitting corners a bit late. They're lighter, though, allowing bigger karts to push you around.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

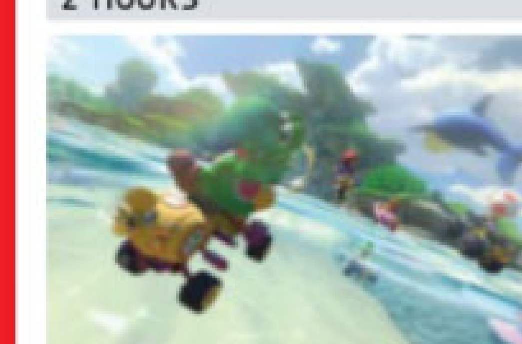
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



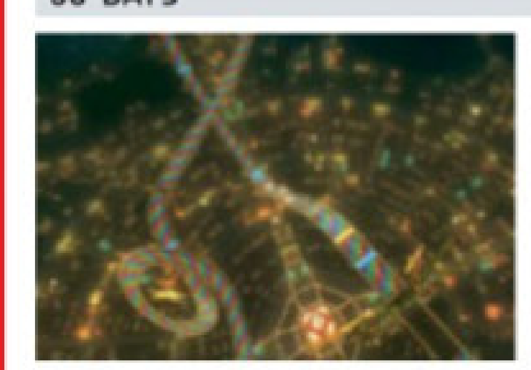
After half an hour, you'll be in the Mushroom Cup, getting to grips with the weightier handling. We'd recommend 50cc.

2 HOURS



You'll be going back to old tracks, seeing how they've changed, and blowing your friends to bits. 100cc recommended for this.

30 DAYS



You'll be gunning for the top scores in Time Trial on the hardest tracks. Prepare for this by combatting the AI on 150cc difficulty.

WEAPONS OF MASS DISTRACTION

Not only does *Mario Kart* introduce 32 playable characters to the game, but it also bumps up the weapon count, dropping in new offensive and defensive tools which can alter the balance of any race in one fell swoop. The Piranha Plant, for example, will toodle along at the front of your cart on little wheels of its own, snapping coins for you, but also snapping any racer within a reasonable radius. The Boomerang will, oddly, fire off in a straight line, and if you miss your quarry, simply align yourself behind them and hope the trajectory of the projectile will see it hit them on the way back to you. If you pick up an '8' weapon, you're in luck – it will grant you the game's eight best weapons as a shield, free to use as projectiles at your leisure.



course we're certain will become a new classic) and you're at full acceleration and speed. You pressure Yoshi – who's just ahead of you – to get onto the anti-gravity section of the track ahead: the courses are non-linear; you're often offered a choice of simple road play, or an anti-gravity alternative.

You force Yoshi onto the track, blocking his turns with the cluster of green shells you recently picked up. Both of you start racing vertically on the track – other racers below you at a 90-degree angle, carrying on as they were – and you hit a weapon box. It's a red shell, perfect. Yoshi is now just ahead of you, so you unleash your homing weapon and the desired effect occurs; the little green guy is rendered static. Now he acts as a bumper – your collision won't grant him any extra speed as he's just starting to get going again, but you can bound off him, into a tight corner, an easy second or two knocked off your lap time.

The online functionality of the game will have the option for 12 human players to get together at once, and we anticipate utter carnage. With 12 human brains operating the karters, the track will be a-flurry with the game's myriad weapons, buzzing around the place in a mirage of deadly colour. Kart games have always been about blasting your opponents off the track or undermining them with, well, mines or bombs, but *Mario Kart 8* alters the balance back to the early days of the genre – weapons no longer stack, so you can't have a banana skin or shell deployed behind you, ready to soak up a projectile or two, whilst having something else tucked away in reserve. You have *one* weapon at all times, and offensive or defensive play has to be prioritised, depending on your current position. Balancing has been altered with regards to the old reliable Blue Shell, too – no longer is the spinning shell of certain death a foolproof strategy: the new horn weapon, which creates a radical shockwave upon deployment, can counter the shells effects. And surprise, surprise – you're much more likely to come across this when you're leading the pack.

WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

WATCH THIS: Mario Kart TV allows players to upload their best moments to a centralised database, where they can also access the ghosts of the best players in the world

Mario Kart 8 has released to a market that's seeing a comeback in the kart racer – *LittleBigPlanet Racing*, *ModNation Racers*, *Sega & Sonic All-Stars Racing Transformed*, *Angry Birds GO* – the land lies thick with competition. Yet Mario still prevails. The little Italian plumber and his entourage of whacky cohorts still manage to retain that secret ingredient that puts them ahead of the pack, and by a comfortable margin. *Mario Kart 8* is the definitive kart racer you'll play this year, and in a market as crowded as this one's becoming, that's saying something.

VERDICT 9/10

THE MASTER OF THE GENRE RETAINS ITS KARTING CROWN

I BELIEVE I CAN FLY

Trials Fusion

You have to hand it to RedLynx for making dying look a lot of fun. Although by no means the main objective of the second *Trials* sequel, once again faceless stunt riders cartwheel through the air, limp bodies thrown from their saddle a hundred feet above ground and eviscerated in a pyrotechnic showcase that makes Guy Fawkes look like an amateur, all to pull off the perfect jump.

In some ways it's the spiritual successor to *Excitebike*. Charging players to deftly navigate over bumps and above pitfalls across a variety of precariously-designed tracks, the goal being to reach the finish line with as few errors and restarts as possible. It's compulsive, exhilarating and often frustrating stuff, the key being to maintain precise handling over the nuanced controls and delicate physics – which is easier said than done when it involves accelerating off a steep ramp and over a ten-metre gap onto a jet engine.

It's this fundamental juxtaposition between skill and absurdity that remains key to *Trials*' appeal and *Fusion* appositely excels in expanding the concept. RedLynx's view of the next-gen isn't far detached from the last but everything has been given a slick sheen and filtered through substantial amounts of lens flare, and when it transitions into science-fiction it finds basis to construct the series' most drama-laden tracks impressive in their inventiveness.

You'll be dropped from a raised platform straight down a stomach-churning ramp and launched into the bowels of a scientific research facility littered with explosive traps (what else?), propelled through jungle foliage and hopping over dismantled plane wreckage, while rockets wait across the finish line to propel your racer into the stratosphere.

It's visually striking stuff, the camera pulling back to drink in the gorgeous terrain, elegantly lit to create snapshots of cinematic grandeur. There's much more variety as well, swiftly jumping between the lush vegetation of inland tropics, sprawling mountain ranges and into curious futuristic constructs.

There's a sense that the developer is both more relaxed and having more fun this time around, exuding a well-earned amount of confidence to expand the design of its tracks (both conceptually and in sheer scale), not to mention some of the mechanics and features that have become series staples.

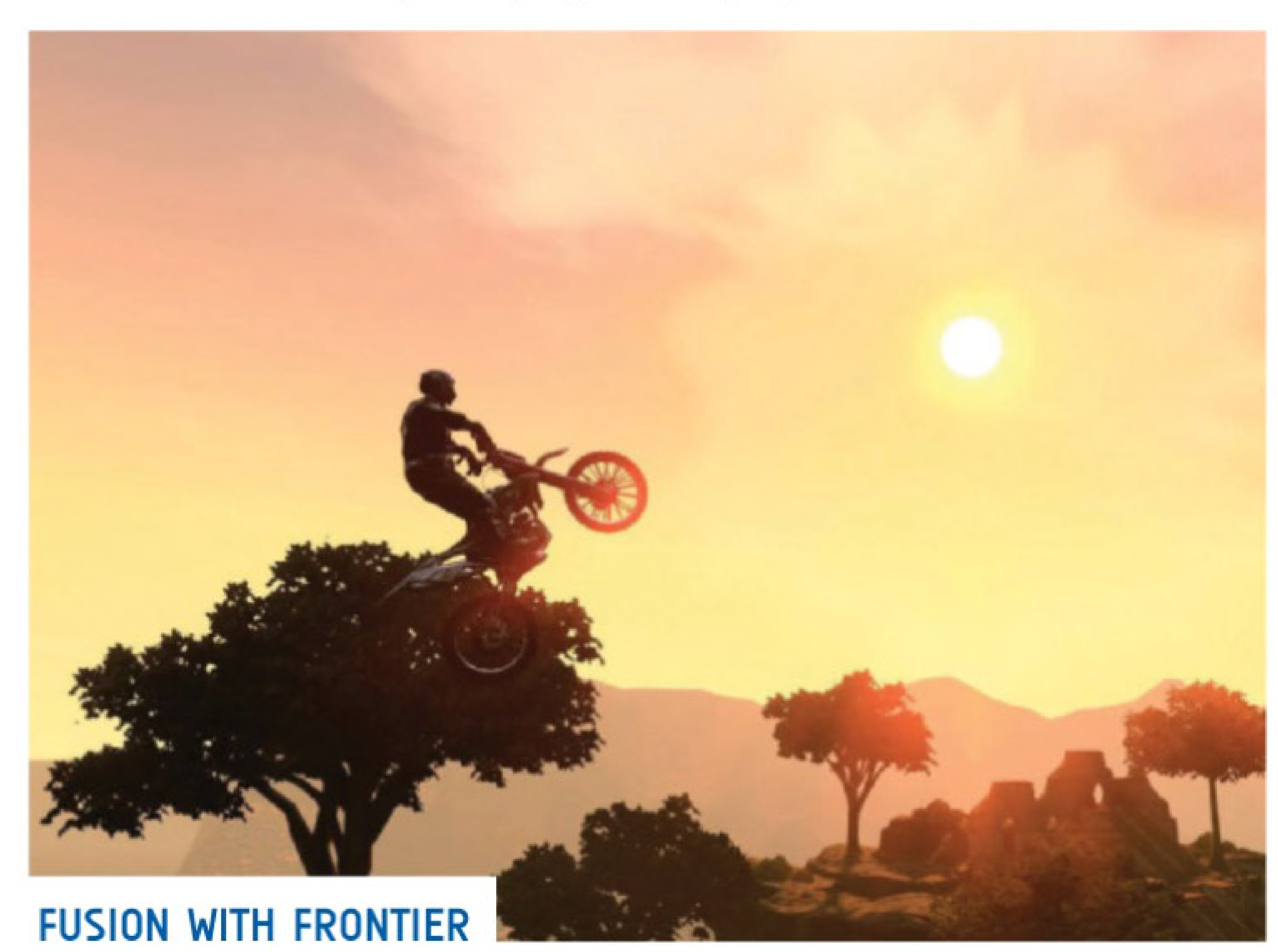
DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox 360, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Finland
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: RedLynx
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: OUT NOW
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



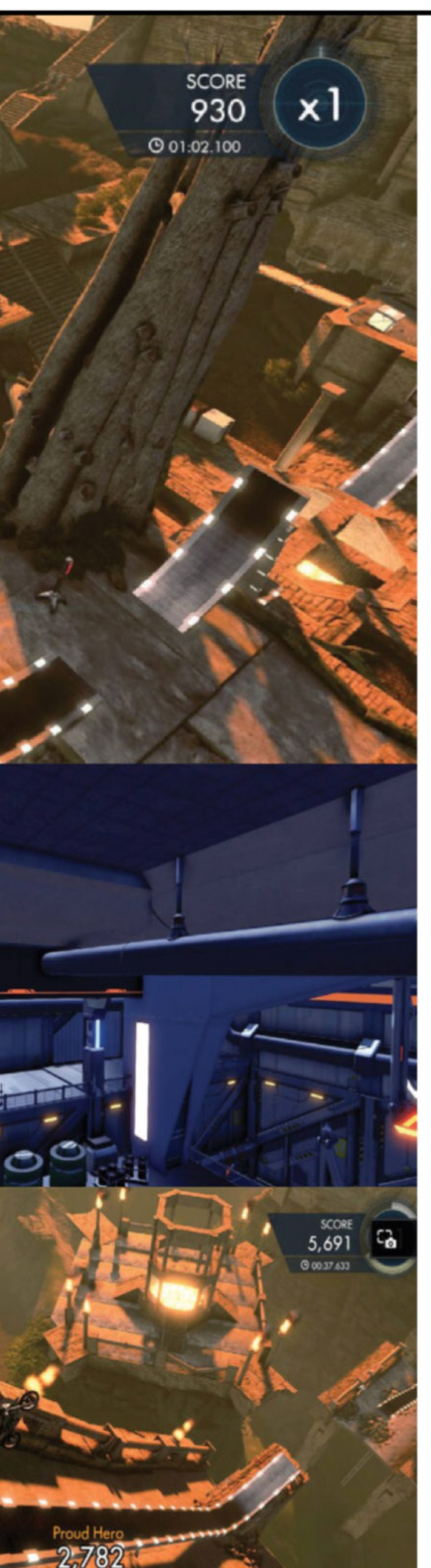


Above: RedLynx provides the requisite amount of lunacy when it comes to explosions, death-defying stunts and bone-crushing crashes.
Right: Some bikes are better for specific tasks than others. One bike has looser handling, which makes it perfect for pulling on tricks and getting the maximum amount of air time.



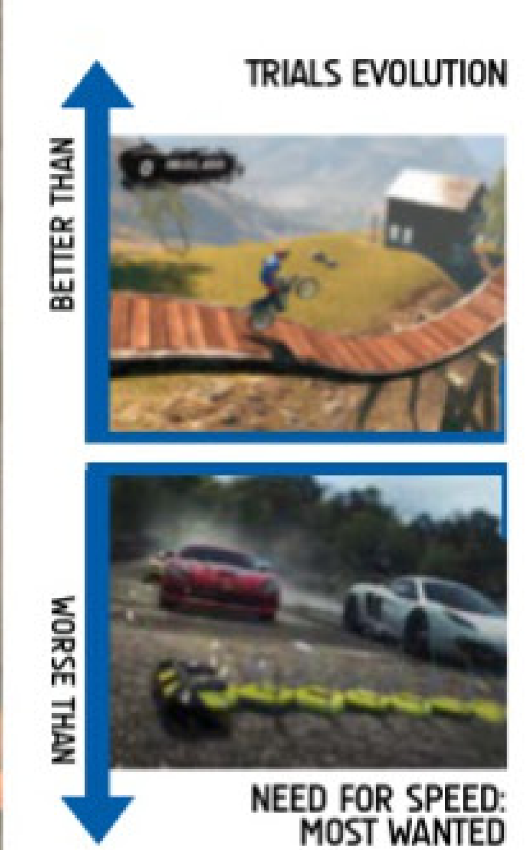
FUSION WITH FRONTIER

If you're prepared to register with Uplay, then you'll be able to access the 'Step Into The Light' feature. Not quite as dramatic as it sounds, it links progression in *Trials Fusion* and its mobile spin-off *Trials Frontier*. It's a shameless promotion for its iOS spin-off, with the purpose of incentivising players to try out both titles. It sets a series of challenges across maps that are available in both games. The reward for doing so is bonus items that can be used in both – the only one we saw available so far is a new character skin – which is a little fussy and unworthy of the effort to obtain.



TRIALS EVOLUTION

BETTER THAN



WORSE THAN

NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED

FAQs

Q. BETTER THAN TRIALS EVOLUTION?
Yes. While it's much more polished, it also packs in a huge amount of features that enhance the core gameplay.

Q. HOW ARE THE BIKES?
There's a greater selection, some tailored specifically for tricks, others for general stunt play. You can also upgrade them.

Q. IS MULTIPLAYER STILL AWESOME?
Local multiplayer is still the best way to play *Trials* and the bigger tracks and larger amount of options make it the best yet.

The most noticeable addition is the inclusion of tricks. While it's not a feature that impacts the entire game, it's mostly implemented for specific point-scoring events. Twist the right thumbstick while airborne and your ragdoll stuntman will perform one of a handful of stunts, with chaining resulting in higher multipliers. Tricks are simple and well implemented, albeit with a few similar inputs getting muddled during play. It's disappointing that these events are restricted to basic linear track-types, rather than merging point-scoring objectives with the larger, more imaginative courses. The result is a handful of adequate courses that play out like linear *Tony Hawk*-style mini-games, rather than anything more significant.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL IS TRICKY: The newest feature is the addition of tricks in *Trials Fusion*. Much like *Tony Hawk* or *SSX*, it brings a fresh, new layer of skill to the proceedings.

Elsewhere, there's the addition of quad bikes to mix up the formula (restricted to specific stages), but its handling isn't considerable enough to signify a massive change of pace from what you'll already be used to by the time you've unlocked the vehicle.

Still, what it does signify is a wealth of content that's crammed into the game. Alongside the new vehicles and level-types are challenges and Easter eggs tucked away in each new level. These are vaguely defined at the start of each track and are ludicrously well hidden in some cases, but they're worth persevering with just to witness how bonkers they are – with many involving penguins.

There's also the expected glut of familiar content that returns: multiplayer and track editor being the two favourites. The former is what a lot of players will be looking to as the main attraction and given the larger track types and variation in bikes, there's plenty here to get your competitive engine roaring.

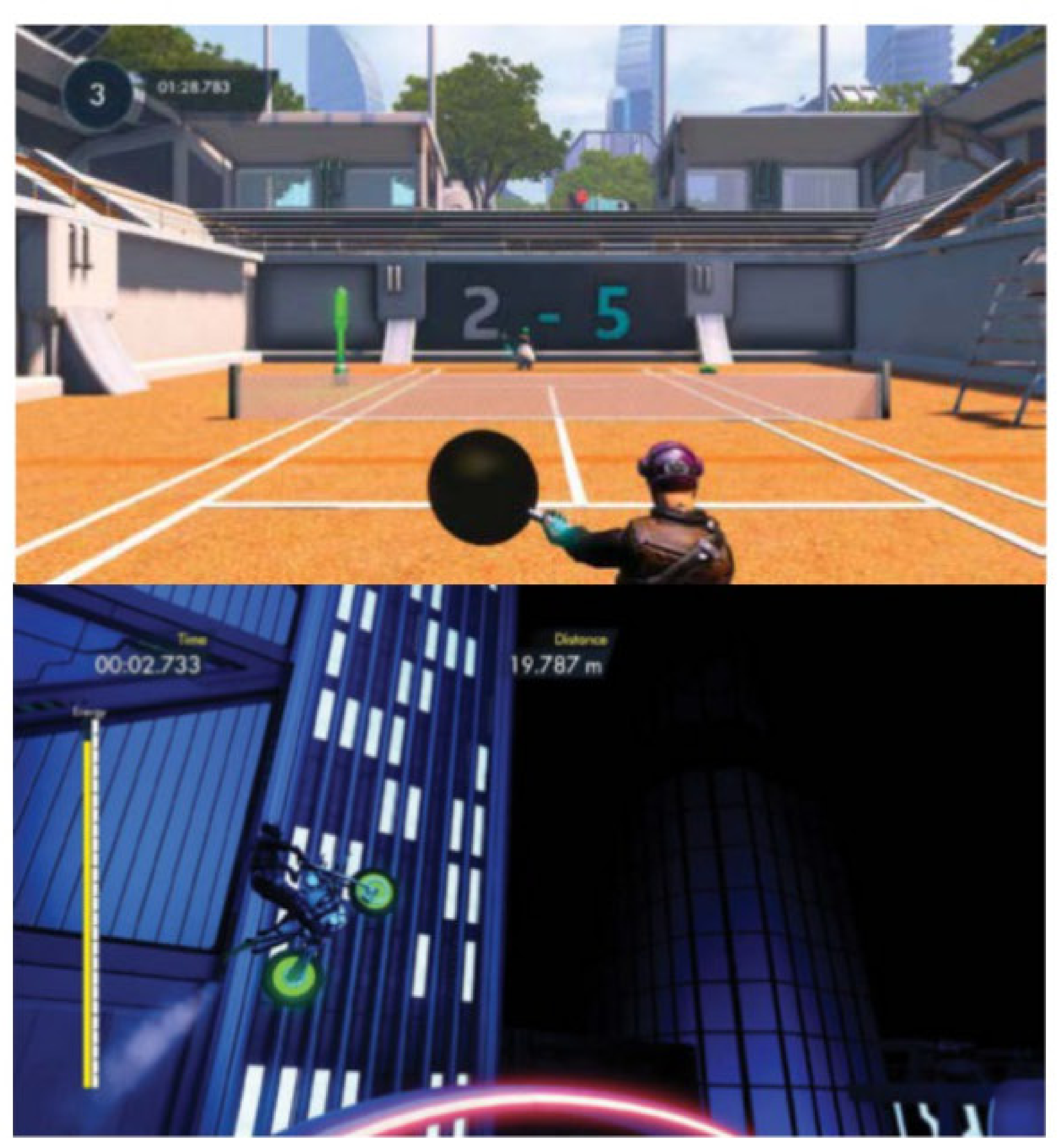
Yet, the single-player is a significant step forward for the series and feels more relevant than ever before. You'll be obsessive over obtaining gold medals on each track, restarting again and again to get that perfect time, or to get to the end without a single fault. While nothing has changed in that regard since the series' inception, all the frills ultimately enhance that obsessive drive to do better.

"TRIALS FUSION IS EVERY BIT THE TRIALS GAME YOU'VE COME TO EXPECT AND THEN SOME"

For the first handful of locations (each housing around eight courses) the learning curve is smooth, but it takes a steep climb after that. Instead of maybe one or two retries at most and blitzing through a course in under a minute, you'll be staring at 20, 40, even 100 retries over the space of a few minutes. It's enough to diminish some of the thrill leading up to that point and draws away from its compulsive nature – not to mention likely turn away a lot of the series' casual fans.

Still, *Trials Fusion* is every bit the *Trials* game you've come to expect and then some. RedLynx has embraced next-gen and taken the series to its next step. While some of its new features fail to shake up the formula, it does make for the most full-bodied and content-heavy entry in the franchise to date.

With this wealth of content and a more robust online system, it doesn't just herald this as the ultimate *Trials* game, but also one that'll have fans hooked for a long time to come.



Above: Multiplayer is the best the series has to offer. At the time of writing many of the online features had yet to be added, so we're expecting it to get even better. **Left:** Some of the courses in *Trials Fusion* are enormous and RedLynx has done a great job of expanding the scope of design without it feeling laboured. Suffice to say, it features some of the series' best tracks.



TRIALS ONCE AGAIN EVOLVES

THE MOST MISLEADING GAME TITLE SINCE LEGENDARY

The Amazing Spider-Man 2

Right: Moments like this are fine. It's when you need to start swinging through the city that *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* becomes annoying as you desperately avoid all buildings in your way.

The opening shot of *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* the movie shows our hero in free-fall, arms outstretched, triumphant fanfare competing with the rush of air for volume. At the last possible second, Spider-Man fires webbing at a nearby building and uses his incredible speed to whip through the Manhattan skyline, shouting with delight as the crowds below gasp in awe. In contrast, swinging around in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* the game is like controlling an empty crisp packet in a breeze, the red and blue hero clattering into buildings via the sort of comic mishaps you'd expect in a YouTube parody.

Whatever studio takes on Spider-Man, it's important they get the art of swinging through a city right because that's what makes this particular superhero... well, *super*. It's why so many Marvel fans hark back to the days of *Spider-Man 2* on the humble PlayStation – it didn't need complicated controls, it didn't need a complicated city. It didn't even need *Amazing* in its name. All it needed was a control system that allowed Spider-Man to defy gravity and get from point A to B with minimum fuss, a lesson that has been lost on Beenox. Case in point: you annoyingly can't webswing when above buildings, a nod to 'realism' given there's nothing to attach web to, so you're forced towards street level more often than not. This then forces you amongst the densest parts of the city where the clumsiness sees Spider-Man clattering into objects far too often, running off buildings when you want to run up them or fighting the camera when using the web-rush move to try and speed up progress.

Inevitably, *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* suffers as a result. You get the sense that Beenox is aware of how awkward the swinging is because there are very few situations in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* that call for any sort aerial precision, almost entirely avoiding the point of a Spider-Man game to begin with. It leaves the experience feeling flat and yet the few situations that do call for aerial finesse, such as having to rescue civilians from a burning building or snatching a floating comic collectible from the sky, are so needlessly frustrating that it somehow feels as though an even bigger disaster was averted by avoiding those scenarios entirely.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, PS4, PS3
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Beenox
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Above: There are plenty of appearances from other characters in Spider-Man's world, as *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* doesn't follow the events of the actual movie at all.



Not that matters improve when Spider-Man touches the ground. The combat system shows that Beenox is yet another studio that has peeked over the fence at what Rocksteady has done with the *Batman: Arkham* series and decided to play copycat. However, flattery only goes so far. Without the slick animation, the dramatic slowdown or choice of moves that defined Batman's combat, it's surprising how dull the system becomes. There's no significant feedback or challenge here, so *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*'s many, *many* beat-the-bad-guys-up missions quickly

Above: As with *Batman: Arkham* series, there's an indicator when attacks are inbound prompting you to press the counter button. It's not nearly as slick or satisfying as Rocksteady's games, however.

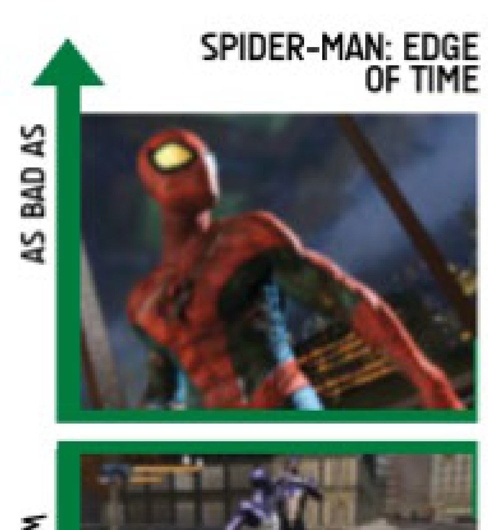
THE BIGGEST QUESTION YOU'LL BE LEFT ASKING IS WHY THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN 2 EXISTS





AS BAD AS

SPIDER-MAN: EDGE OF TIME



WORSE THAN



SPIDER-MAN: WEB OF SHADOWS

FAQs

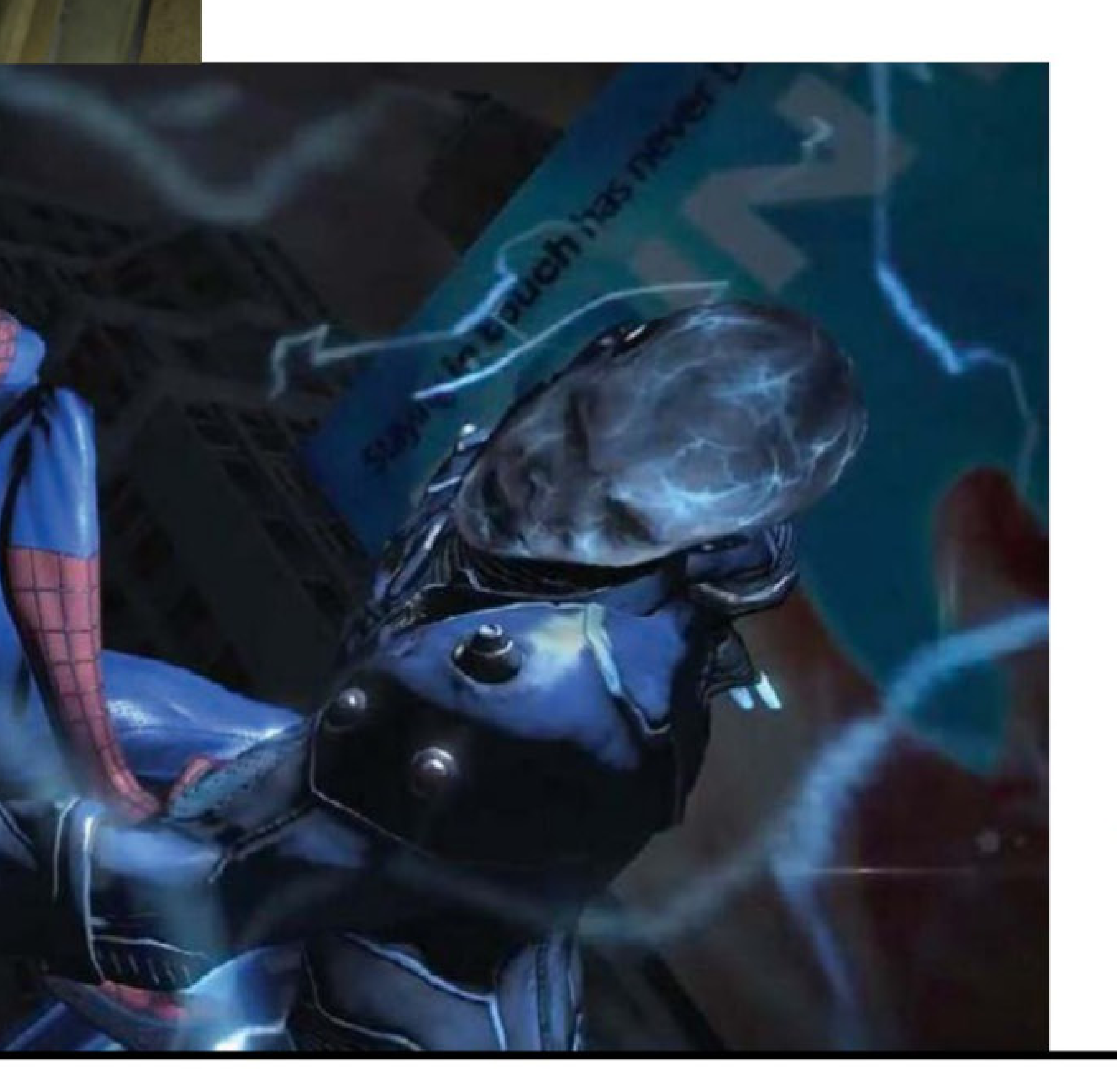
Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
It won't take any longer than six hours on the hardest difficulty, more if you want to mop up the collectibles.

Q. WHAT COLLECTIBLES ARE THERE?
Comic books, Oscorp crates, photograph opportunities and other bits and bobs that add up to a 100% completion rating.

Q. EASY ACHIEVEMENTS?
Overall, this is a surprisingly easy game to grab the bulk of achievements for but there are a few that will take a long, long time.

SOUND OF THE POLICE

A few hours into *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, a task force is introduced that hunts Spider-Man down if he's deemed to be a 'menace'. What this means is that you have to complete tasks such as stopping petty crimes or rescuing hostages to keep your hero meter topped up. That would be fine except these mini-games quickly repeat themselves and your meter drains far too quickly if you ignore them, adding an extra level of busybody work that isn't necessary and adds nothing to the game. There really is nothing positive we have to say here. As a distraction, they would just about work. As a necessity, they're needlessly annoying.



become tedious. There's nothing here that gives *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* any sense of personality or purpose. You can take pictures of evidence or bodyguards, a nod to Peter Parker's day job at *The Daily Bugle*, but these tasks are so basic that they fail to engage on any level bar chasing down a 100% completion rating. There are drab sections dotted through that make you wonder what Beenox was aiming for – stealth sections that rely on an 'awareness' meter that drains those scenarios of any tension, a crawl through the dull, clanking towers of Oscorp Industries, etc.

Strangest of all are the conversation options that occasionally rear their head in cutscenes. The purpose of branching dialogue in games like *Mass Effect* or *Deus Ex* is that choosing the right path through conversations means you'll learn something new, your reward for being smart and selecting the right approach with the person you're talking to (and missing out on that information serving as punishment for failing). Here, they serve no purpose at all – you click through them in any order to get the dialogue you want. There's no succeeding, no failing. They're just extra buttons to press. Utterly bizarre, utterly pointless.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SWINGERS The main fault with *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* is the swinging, which doesn't work if you're above buildings and is too complicated below them.

There are the odd flashes of inspiration tucked away under the wreckage, such as the boss battles that are weirdly enjoyable, and the moments when Spider-Man is out of costume. It's nice to see Peter Parker visiting home to chat with Aunt May or interviewing Kraven the Hunter in his lair but then these are flashes of unrealised potential that never blossom into anything more. It's a wasted opportunity that's particularly galling given that dynamic between Spider-Man the hero and Peter Parker the person is what the movie has picked as its core theme and something only hinted at here. The biggest question you'll be left asking is why *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* exists.

It doesn't do anything interesting with open-world games, being content to regurgitate a half-baked checklist of previous genre entries. It doesn't play to Spider-Man's strengths, either, instead making swinging around Manhattan painfully awkward. It doesn't help justify your purchase of a shiny new next-gen console. It doesn't even work as an overpriced hey-do-you-remember-this-bit-from-the-film piece of merchandise, as Max Dillon haircut aside, nothing happens here that syncs up with the big screen adventure. The nicest thing we can say about *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* is that it's a game that exists and given its glitches and the fact that you can only get the Xbox One version via digital download, it only just about manages to achieve that.

VERDICT 2/10
THE INCREDIBLY DISAPPOINTING SPIDER-MAN 2



Above: The setting for this battle shows that even *Child Of Light*'s more ominous locations are beautiful in their own way. Enemies like these can be pretty tough, but you'll rarely be in true peril on the game's normal difficulty setting.

BURNING BRIGHT

Child Of Light

The fantastic world of Lemuria, in which *Child Of Light* is set, is indisputably beautiful. The landscapes through which the player travels are diverse, but, without exception, aesthetically delightful, their sumptuous hand-painted style dovetailing with a superb soundtrack to help lend *Child Of Light* the dream-like, fairytale quality for which it is so obviously drawing heavy inspiration from.

There is a temptation to assume that this Canadian interpretation of a Japanese genre hides beneath that pretty veneer a game that's lacking mechanical complexity, that this downloadable take on the JRPG is an atrophied imposter stripped of the depth that marks out some of the best games in that genre. On the contrary, while *Child Of Light* may be streamlined in some respects, the game contains a satisfying battle system that rewards thought and strategy, and as such, is just as accountable for *Child Of Light*'s appeal as the aesthetics that surround it.

Much of the intrigue in *Child Of Light*'s turn-based battle system derives from the focus that the game places on managing your place on the timeline that determines when it is your turn to act. Being hit while casting a spell will interrupt your action, knocking you back on the timeline and forcing you to wait for your opportunity to cast again. For that reason, the decision on which attacks, buffs and spells to use in battle isn't only about maximising damage, or exploiting elemental affiliations, but considering their impact on your party's and enemies' place on the timeline. Varying cast times, and abilities that effect speed and positioning on the timeline, serve to make *Child Of Light* a game that's not just about what you do, but when you do it.

It's a simple, but intriguing system - one that's added to by virtue of the diversity of *Child Of Light*'s roster of characters. Each character's selection of abilities – unlocked by spending experience points in a grid-based upgrade system – are suitably distinct, ensuring that every character plays a very specific role in combat. Different characters alternately focus on, to provide a few examples, dealing elemental damage, buffing allies, absorbing damage, or healing. None of the roster feels overpowered, but all feel useful in their own unique way, meaning that it's common to constantly switch

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC, Xbox 360, PS3, Wii U
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Montreal
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

CHILD OF LIGHT IS INCREDIBLY ADEPT AT GUIDING THE PLAYER TO THE PLACE THEY NEED TO BE WITHOUT THEM KNOWING IT

FAQs

Q. IS THERE MULTIPLAYER?

A second player can control Igniculus, a ball of light who can slow down enemies and collect items, but interaction is limited.

Q. ARE THERE SIDE QUESTS?

Yes. *Child Of Light* isn't one of those 60-hour affairs, but there's still a decent amount of optional content.

Q. DO YOU HAVE TO GRIND?

No. Providing you don't avoid too many enemies, you'll level up swiftly in *Child Of Light*.



Left: The characters that Aurora meets on her journey are forgettable, in large part due to the game's poor writing.



Right: Once Aurora obtains the ability to fly, you can soar through *Child of Light*'s stunning landscapes.

Below: You'll find that the desire to see more of the world will propel you forward to a far greater degree than the game's dull good vs evil narrative.

NOT CRAFTY ENOUGH

'Oculi' (gems) can be attached to characters in order to augment their abilities by adding elemental effects, boosting their magic power, increasing experience gain, and so on. A crafting system allows players to combine Oculi to enhance the gems' power, or create new varieties. It's a system that initially seems interesting, but isn't really given the space to grow. The JRPG staple of equipment – in the form of weapons, armour and accessories – is absent in *Child Of Light* and it feels as if the Oculi system was included as a means to fill that gap. It's unfortunate to discover that it fails to do so.



TALES OF SYMPHONIA CHRONICLES

BETTER THAN

AS GOOD AS

SOUTH PARK: THE STICK OF TRUTH

party members in order to change up your tactics, or deal with a particular situation in battle. That *Child Of Light* allows you to approach battles with an array of different strategies, and that its roster is so well-balanced, makes it a surprisingly cerebral and rewarding experience.

Where *Child Of Light* most substantially differs from the games that have influenced it is in the way that you move through the world. Lemuria is explored on a 2D plane, flying through caves and caverns, over wide-open spaces, waters and wind-swept plains. *Child Of Light* feels incredibly free, its world amenable to the kind of exploration that will yield the discovery of looping, interconnected routes and secret nooks and crannies. Aurora's swift and responsive movement makes that discovery a pleasure. Yet, despite its sense of freedom, *Child Of Light* is incredibly adept at guiding the player to the place that they need to be without them knowing it – a testament to the world's subtle but excellent level design.

Not everything is so bright in the world of Lemuria, however. *Child Of Light*'s developers have previously described the game as a "playable poem", with all the game's exposition and character dialogue written in rhyme. To call this game's writing 'poetry', however, is an insult to that art. The decision to shun standard prose and try a different approach with *Child Of Light* is both admirable and understandable (given the game's fairytale-like setting). Unfortunately, this doesn't change the fact that the game's writing frequently feels awkward and contrived, to the point that it quickly becomes grating. That *Child Of Light*'s narrative is a rather dull and uninspired interpretation of the fairytale (albeit one that jarringly adds a reverence for capitalism to the formula) doesn't help matters, but Lemuria is such a beautiful place that the player will want to love it, to give themself over and be enveloped by it.

The game's lore and characters should stand tall on the platform provided by *Child Of Light*'s superb aesthetic elements to allow players to do just that, but, alas, *Child Of Light*'s writing makes it difficult to truly connect with both the place and people in the way that you'd hope. There simply isn't much here to connect to. *Child Of Light* is an excellent distillation of the core elements of the JRPG in so many respects, so it's a real shame to see it fall short when it comes to the ability to create memorable characters and locations that will be loved by its audience.

Child Of Light clearly respects its source material, but has borrowed, played with and mutated the key tenants of the JRPG in order to create a fresh and unique interpretation of that genre. *Child Of Light* is considerably more accessible, less sprawling and more focused than those games in whose footsteps it follows, but, crucially, it rarely feels as if it's been compromised as a result. With its rewarding battle system, brilliantly balanced roster, unerringly rendered watercolour landscapes and excellent soundtrack, *Child Of Light* succeeds in offering strategic satisfaction through its mechanics, whilst creating a world that's delightful to explore. *Child Of Light* might lack the world-building and narrative drive in its writing to make it as special it might have been, but the game is so strong in every other aspect that it more than gets away with it.

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

EASTERN INFLUENCE: JRPGs are the key reference point for *Child Of Light*, but 2D exploration and mild puzzle-solving form an equally important part of the equation.



VERDICT 8/10

A FRESH INTERPRETATION OF A FAMILIAR FORMULA

SAMBA-SOAKED SOCCER SPIN-OFF

2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil

Football's return to its spiritual homeland is sure to result in one of the most memorable World Cups in a long time but, with *2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil* releasing a full two months ahead of the tournament's opening match, EA Canada was certainly up against it to create a game that captured the samba spirit. Their efforts in creating the electric atmosphere expected by many are admirable though.

The crowd has been rendered better than any previous football title, with various cutscenes to the stands helping to capture the joy and frustration of the beautiful game. The cutaways to England supporters celebrating in Trafalgar Square, or German fans cheering at the Brandenburg Gate, are also a nice touch Unfortunately though, the visuals are the fans' best attributes, as the stadium atmospheres seem just a little too similar to any match in *FIFA 14*, with a distinct lack of the carnival atmosphere expected in Brazil.

The 12 World Cup stadiums themselves are stunning, and the addition of real World Cup advertising hoardings adds an extra level of reality compared to the rolling EA/FIFA fodder in the normal games, but the whole thing lacks the jaw-dropping visual that next-gen affords. And, ultimately, the flashy cutscenes and improved presentation is all impressive for the hardcore gamer, but it doesn't really matter to *FIFA*'s core audience who are much more likely to be skipping through the cutscenes to get to what matters: the gameplay.

We're roughly halfway between the release of *FIFA 14* and whatever its successor will be named, meaning that *World Cup* is privy to a number of minor tweaks, rather than anything worthy of its full-fat asking price. On first impressions, the Adidas Brazuca ball (the official World Cup pigskin) seems heavier than in recent EA football titles. Its flight through the air seems more laboured, and boot-on-ball contact only results in an unsatisfyingly dull thud. Yet, despite these failings, the ball dynamics help in creating a game that relies less on outright pace than its predecessors.

While players such as mercurial Messi can still outstrip the opposition's defence, there is a greater sense of physicality present in *World Cup*, resulting in a more accurate appraisal of top class football. Nowhere is this felt more than in the aerial dynamics. EA Sports is quick to sing the praises of the new 'over-the-shoulder' heading animation, which does allow stronger (and taller) rated players to really get above their opponents. In defensive situations it can prove a get-out-of-jail-free card yet, directing the ball off your player's head is still as infuriating as it ever was, stymying any chance of using the new feature to launch effective attacks.

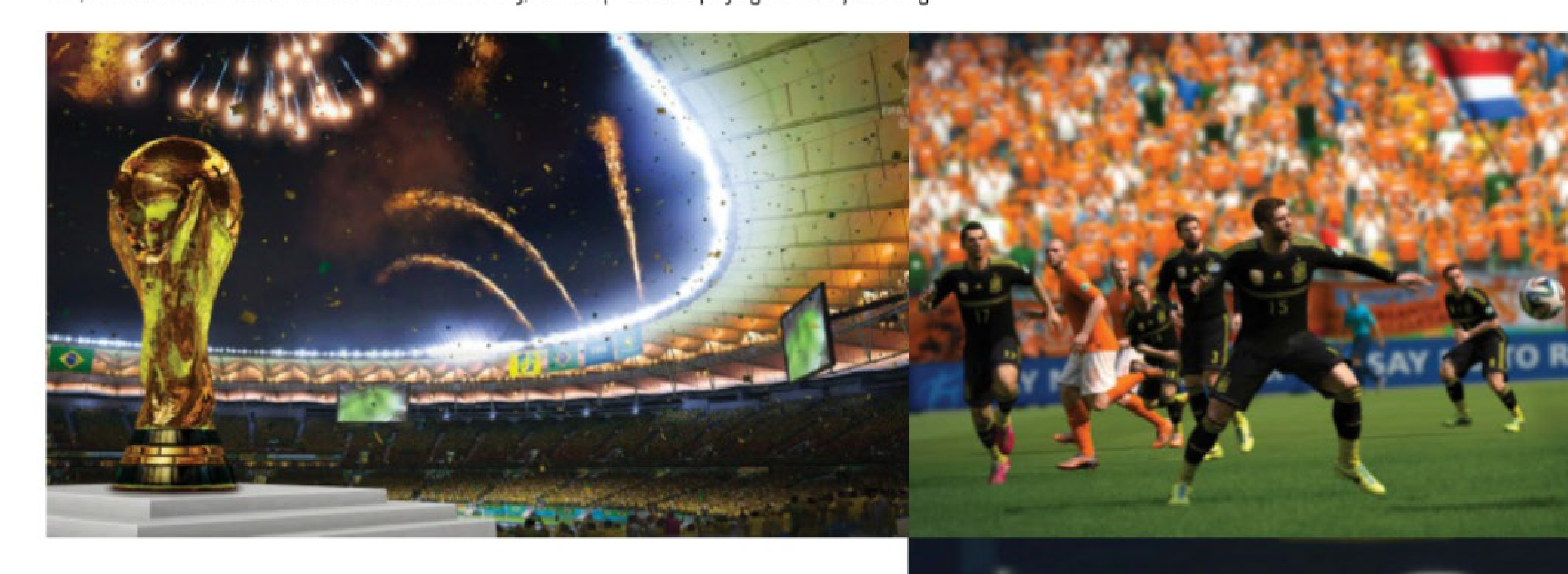
The additional weight of the ball, coupled with more realistic passing animations and dynamics makes attacking as a team a

DETAILS

FORMAT REVIEWED: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: EA Sports
DEVELOPER: EA Canada
PRICE: £39.99 ($59.99)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-7 (2-22 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



Right: There's an increased physicality, especially when jostling for the ball. Unfortunately, referees continue to clamp down harshly (mirroring the trend in real-life).



Below: Lifting the FIFA World Cup Trophy is as exhilarating as ever (and it is vibrantly realised by EA Canada) but, with this moment as little as seven matches away, don't expect to be playing *World Cup* for long.

Right: The 'over the shoulder' heading animation improves realism and allows aerial balls to be contested better by stronger players. However, directing the path of your header and retaining possession is still as haphazard as previous *FIFA* offerings.

THERE IS A GREATER SENSE OF PHYSICALITY PRESENT, RESULTING IN A MORE ACCURATE APPRAISAL OF TOP-CLASS FOOTBALL



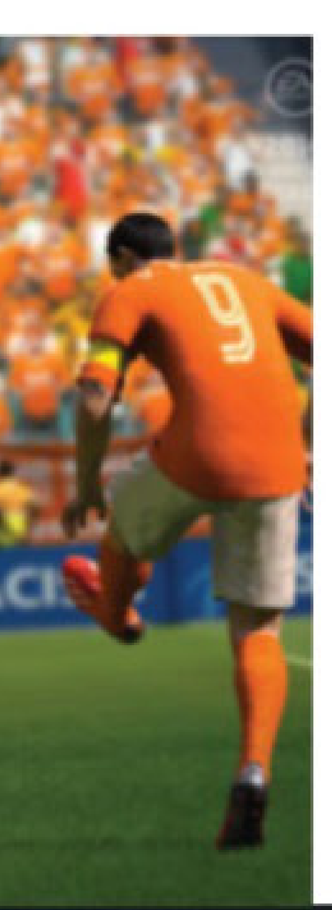


FAQs

Q. CAN YOU GANGNAM STYLE?
Yes! When celebrating a goal, hold L1 and press R3 to do your best Psy impression.

Q. ARE THERE MANAGERS?
19 officially licensed international managers are present, including the likes of Roy Hodgson and Luis Felipe Scolari.

Q. RONALDO OR MESSI?
With dribbling proving as difficult as ever, Messi's excellent pace and finishing is the winner.



ON THE SUBS BENCH

The often neglected 'Be a Pro' mode is given another run out in 2014 FIFA World Cup, this time rebranded as the similarly aspirational 'Captain your Country'. While the title may be new, the mode itself is much of the same, allowing you to either create your own player, or take on the persona of an already established star. The aim is to work your way into the 23-man squad flying to Brazil, impressing the manager during your team's qualification campaign. The World Cup context provides some much-needed pizazz, as does the tension of making each of the manager's cuts as he narrows down his World Cup squad but the lonely play style and awkward camera angles still mean that this mode is always going to play second fiddle to the main FIFA experience.



satisfying endeavour. However, running with the ball as an individual is still clumpy. Despite the additional 100 animations EA claims to have implemented, dribbling often ends with the opponents coming away with the ball.

What's more, while *World Cup* sees greater AI intelligence, your computer-controlled teammates still show a propensity for drifting offside, waiting for the ball to roll to them and taking an extra step when taking high balls over the shoulder. All have featured in previous *FIFA* games, and it's a shame these failings still haven't been shown the red card. The four setpiece selections when taking a corner are a welcome development, adding the ability to mildly control your players in the box.

While it could make scoring from corners easy, it still requires you to place the ball accurately, maintaining a necessary challenge. Unfortunately, given the game's large focus on training (single-player campaigns are interspersed with skippable skills sessions) these four training ground actions can't be customised. Not much can be said of the online modes that vary little from *FIFA 14*. Ultimate Team is non-existent with the ranking-based 'Seasons' mode replaced with the 12-stage 'Road to Rio de Janeiro' where you progress through the various World Cup stadia until reaching the Maracana. 'Online FIFA World Cup' is simply a seven-match test that follows the usual routine.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

VIRTUAL BLATTER: The FIFA president awards the World Cup Trophy should you triumph in the final.
EVERY NATION: Play as any one of the 203 nations that attempted to qualify, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe.

In single-player, the choices are expansive, with '2014 FIFA World Cup' allowing you to play through a campaign from the group stages to the final. Fixtures can either be kept true to real life, or customised to suit your wants. Similarly, you are also able to swap in a team that hasn't qualified for the tournament.

For a more drawn-out challenge, 'Road to the FIFA World Cup' lets you take any one of 203 nations on the journey through the qualification stages, including international friendlies. The EA Sports Talk Radio is a nice addition that adds some light relief, although the optional 'Men in Blazers' pairing begin to grate after roughly ten seconds. On top of the two campaigns, the two 'Story of…' modes allow you to recreate key moments from the last three years of World Cup qualifying and, once the tournament starts, the finals themselves. While the challenges are tough enough to keep you occupied, the feature could have been much better realised had it included truly historic moments from World Cups past. Unfortunately it's indicative of a game that ultimately will only appeal to World Cup fanatics, rather than drawing in any new fans to the *FIFA* franchise.

VERDICT 7/10
CLASSY BUT COMPROMISED FULL-PRICE FOOTBALLER

DON'T GO INTO THE LIGHT

Daylight

Above: Flares will act as your lifeline, of sorts, which you can use to scare off the horrors that chastise you. That's correct, *you* will scare *them*. Something tells us Zombie Studios has the idea of survival horror all wrong.

With all due respect, horror is a fairly simple genre to work with. To do it *properly*, to do it *well*, takes a lot of skill and craft, of course, but piece together a few cheap scares and a barely-cohesive storyline and you'll have something that genre fans will lap up. They may not love it, they may not herald it as the saviour of horror, but genre fans are surprisingly resilient in the face of every level of quality sent their way. *Daylight* may well test that hardiness.

It begins in an asylum (of *course* it does, they all do), and gets more clichéd and more wearisome by the minute. Taking its cues from the *Amnesia* school of horror, *Daylight*'s gameplay has you traipsing through eerie halls armed only with a light source – in this case a smartphone with the longest battery life ever – as you rummage through drawers and look for clues. The overall objective is fairly simple, requiring you to look for a token or item that will unlock the exit of the area you're trapped in while encountering the obvious and expectant horror tropes the game is built upon. Yet saying nothing of the mundanity of the task at hand, *Daylight*'s biggest criticism is its inability to evoke fear. Not a great point to have to make in relation to a horror game. Sure, the environments are purposefully horrific – in the same way any room devoid of light has an inherent anxiety to it – but there's little here designed to actually get you feeling that sense of panic. The biggest issue lies with the central entity that will hound you as you explore; where *Amnesia* has you racing for your life in search of safe hiding spots, *Daylight*'s antagonist is so slow, and so lumbering that it's enough simply to run away and casually hang around until it gives up.

It's not even that *Daylight* is incapable of scares – however cheap they may be – but that the ones it does use are so unoriginal it'll be tough to restrain yourself from rolling

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Atlus
DEVELOPER: Zombie Studios
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: 29 April 2014
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2.3 GHz CPU, 4GB RAM, DX11 Compatible GPU, 5GB HDD Space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

SO UNORIGINAL, IT'LL BE TOUGH TO RESTRAIN YOURSELF FROM ROLLING YOUR EYES



FAQs

Q. WRITTEN BY JESSICA CHOBOT?

Yep. If you thought her robotic inclusion in *Mass Effect 3* was bad, wait 'til you hear the dialogue in *Daylight*.

Q. THAT'S A BIT MEAN?

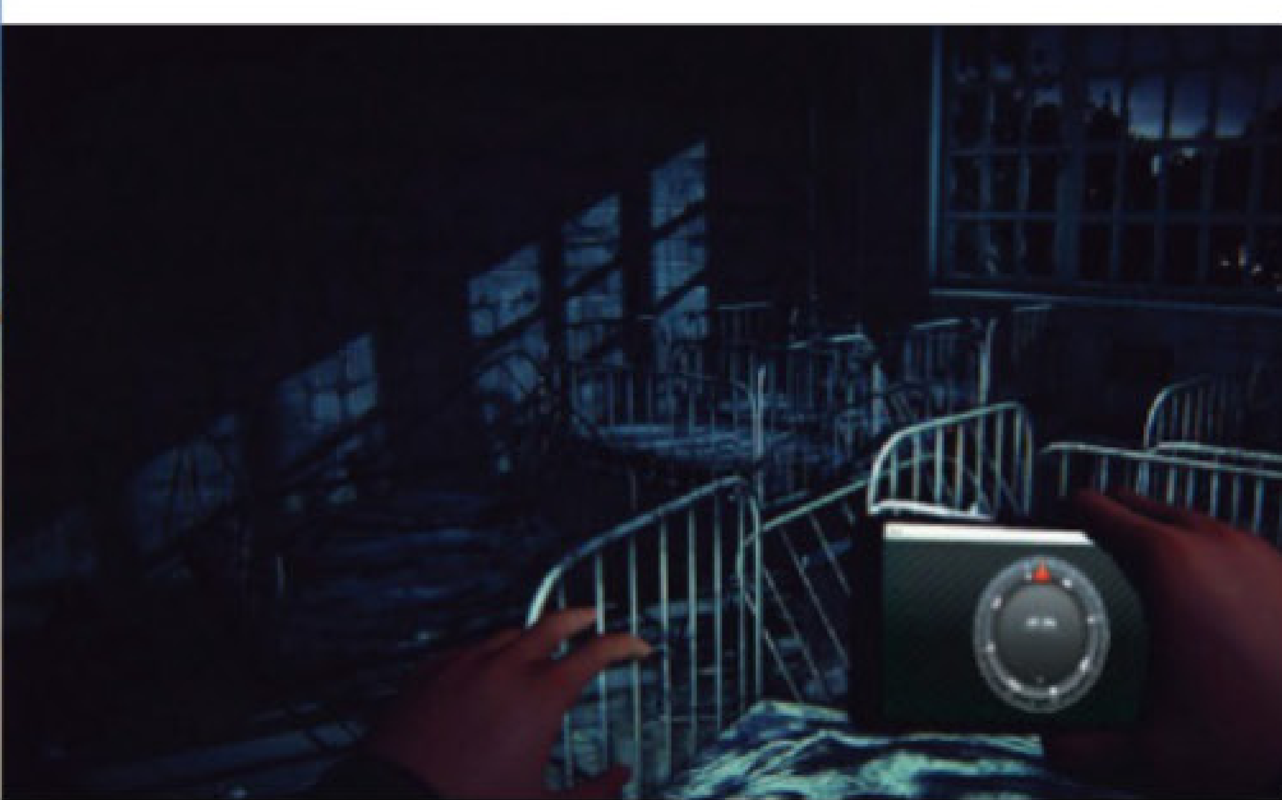
Perhaps. It was a hard task, of course, to write a story for a procedurally generated horror game. The writing *is* awful though.

Q. AND NOT SCARY?

Well, it can be, but in ridiculously obvious ways. Like when your friend hides behind a door and jumps out at you.



Below: We're not against asylums and hospitals being used as settings for horror games, but it just adds to *Daylight*'s already excessive number of clichés and tropes.



Right: As soon as you learn the game's boundaries, the atmosphere quickly drains away.

Below: Your smartphone will act as a map, and it will appear almost permanently in the bottom right corner. Still, a minimap is still a minimap, regardless of how it looks.



your eyes. And if despondency and familiarity are the only feelings your horror game can raise, then there's a bigger problem at heart here. In between scraggily-haired ghost girls and the various supernatural jumps that we've all seen before, there isn't a single original aspect to *Daylight*.

That is, of course, except for the procedural generation that powers the rooms you'll explore. It's a grand concept but one that doesn't really – ultimately – impact the game in any tangible way. Though the rooms themselves may change in size, shape or content, the process you'll undergo is no different. The furniture may sit on the left instead of the right, but your end goal is no different. The barely hidden notes providing the crux of the game's exposition might sit atop a bed, a table or a chest of drawers but their words will be exactly the same. This in itself is not necessarily a problem, but if the reliance of Daylight is on its replayability then there are two criticisms to be had. First, that the variety of the gameplay does not warrant a second playthrough. And second, that Daylight is barely worth playing through the first time, let alone another. The illusion of replayability or creativity is another little annoyance in a game full of them.

The story is abhorrent, and enough to put you off for a second visit. There's just enough to piece the events of the gameplay together, but it's all so *daft* that you'll likely not want to pay it any heed. The writing, the voice acting and everything in between make it exceptionally difficult to care, resulting in what is little more than a randomly generated maze. Without saying too much, *Daylight*'s tale revolves entirely around a coven of witches – and that is quite as ridiculous as it sounds, even for a genre predisposed to being a tad silly.

Sadly, even graphically *Daylight* cannot sell itself. While it may well be built on Unreal Engine 4, it is not well built on Epic's latest engine. With all the usual fanfare of a new 'next-gen' engine at its disposal, Zombie Studios has crafted a game that – while not hideous – does not compete with any of its most recent contemporaries. Muddy textures and poor character models all make for a rather grim experience, and not in a fashion that a horror game ought to. It's not that a horror game really requires such high-end visual treats, but for a game already bereft of praise it would have been nice if *Daylight* could at least have made a case for all the bells and whistles of Unreal Engine 4.

There's nothing if not integrity to the *idea* of *Daylight* – namely a horror game with replayability – but its execution cannot even be described as lacklustre, but deficient. There is a sense of atmosphere, at least early on, and it would be remiss to say that a handful of scares, however hackneyed, do manage to hit the mark. Sadly horror fans may well have already played the game, and for that we're sorry.

The ultimate problem for *Daylight* is that, as of now, the horror genre is booming, particularly on the PC/indie scene, at least, as much as it can be. The likes of *Slenderman* have opened up a world of free experiences, while *Amnesia* and company prove there's money to be made here too. Even *Outlast*, in spite of its flaws and unoriginality, manages to make itself a worthy horror experience. There is great horror to be had out there, especially on PC – you just have to know where to find it. You won't find it, however, in *Daylight*.

MISSING LINK

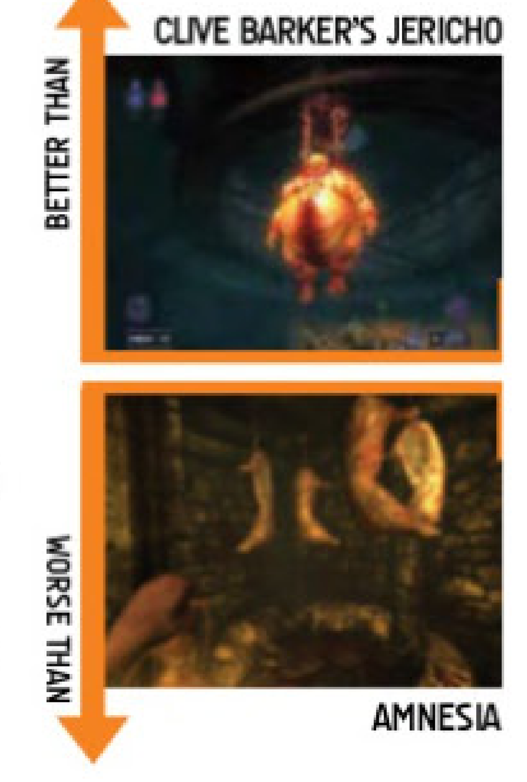
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DIE HARD Well first off we'd start by making it scary. All the other complaints surrounding *Daylight* could be forgiven – albeit slightly – if the game managed to do the one thing it set out to do.

BOXED IN

Horror games are known for the odd puzzle or two, and we won't begrudge *Daylight* for attempting the same. The problem it has is not only the unnecessary nature of the puzzles but the arbitrary nature with which they're included. Worst of all are the crate puzzles, which will see you shoving boxes around warehouses as though it was some kind of darkened *Zelda* clone. Puzzles that made sense – and there are plenty of available to a hospital and prison setting – would have at least added something to *Daylight*. Instead it only highlights the unoriginality.

BETTER THAN: CLIVE BARKER'S JERICHO



WORSE THAN: AMNESIA



AZURE AS NIGHT FOLLOWS DAY...

BlazBlue: Chrono Phantasma

Right: If you play *BlazBlue* for the story, then more power to you, but we find it badly translated, irritatingly voiced and needlessly complicated. Still, it sets up good bouts.

Some people find overtly Japanese games inaccessible – big, strange eyes, bright colours, mythologically-infused nonsense narratives and winding, labyrinthine lore *do* have the potential to put players off, but by the same token, flocks of hardcore fans find themselves inexorably drawn to distinctly Japanese games exclusively for these themes. *BlazBlue* has always been a series that celebrates its off-the-wall, heavy-metal anime roots in the most rambunctious of ways, and the newest instalment, *Chrono Phantasma*, is no exception.

For long-time fans of the series, there are new characters, rebalancing tweaks and a couple of new modes to chew on, while newcomers to the franchise will find some of the new fighters beginner-friendly enough to easily jump in and start fighting with. Unlike the majority of one-on-one 2D fighters, each character in *BlazBlue* has a gimmick that can be activated with the X button – their Drive – that can be either incorporated into combos or added on to button presses to augment standard moves.

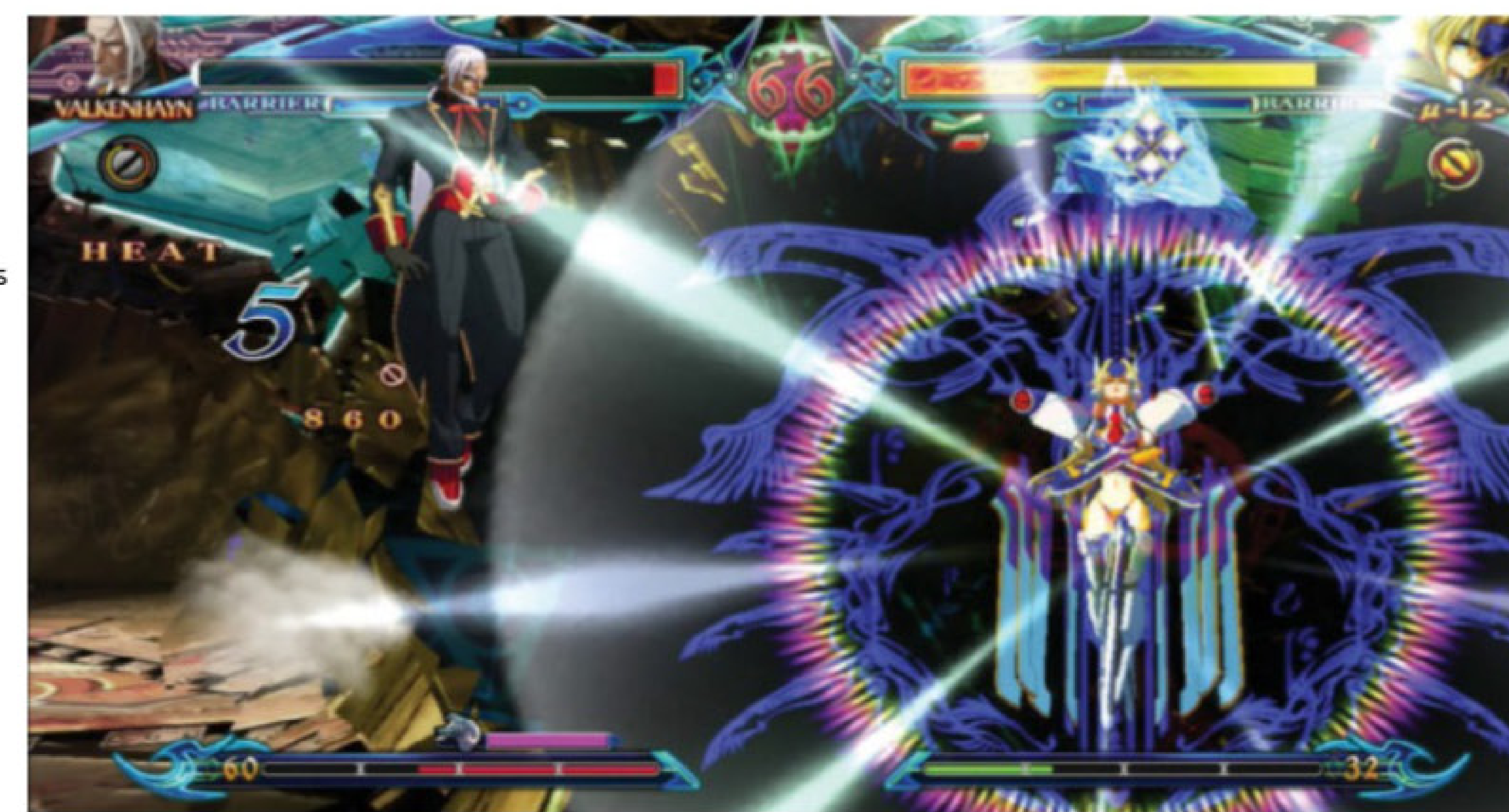
Our most familiar character, Nu-13, has the ability to summon astral swords, for example, widening her movepool from close- to mid-range attacks with ranged swords that are incredibly useful when zoning enemies. Mixing that with her gravity well special moves (which slow enemies down and prevent them from jumping in certain areas) can lead to some incredible setups that allow Nu-13 to achieve high Heat levels (read: long combos). It can take a while, but the joy of *BlazBlue* is figuring out exactly what each character's gimmick is, and how it can be used to augment the rest of their moveset, and which characters the attacks will be more or less effective against.

The new characters throw a welcome mix-up into the pool of characters that, honestly, have been stagnating a little over the last few releases. Amane Nishiki is an androgynous newcomer who wears a kimono and sees battle as a dance on a stage – with a kimono that comes alive and can be hurled at enemies for ranged attacks. Oddly, this will only hit certain areas of the screen; simply having the kimono go *through* an enemy will be ineffective – there are very specific hitboxes that you'll need to learn to use Amane efficiently. Amane is decidedly mid-tier, and their Drive sees them charge up their clothing before transforming it into a drill that can break through enemy's barriers. Amane is hard to get the hang of, but can be a great wall-buster and anti-zoner.

Bullet is another new addition, and a bizarre mix of rapid attacker and grappler, whose Drive lets her lock onto her opponents and rush them with grabs. While very beginner-friendly, all Bullet's Drives can be blocked, making her gimmick little more than a one-

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
OTHER FORMATS: Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Aksys Games
DEVELOPER: Arc System Works
PRICE: $49.99
RELEASE: Out now (NA)
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



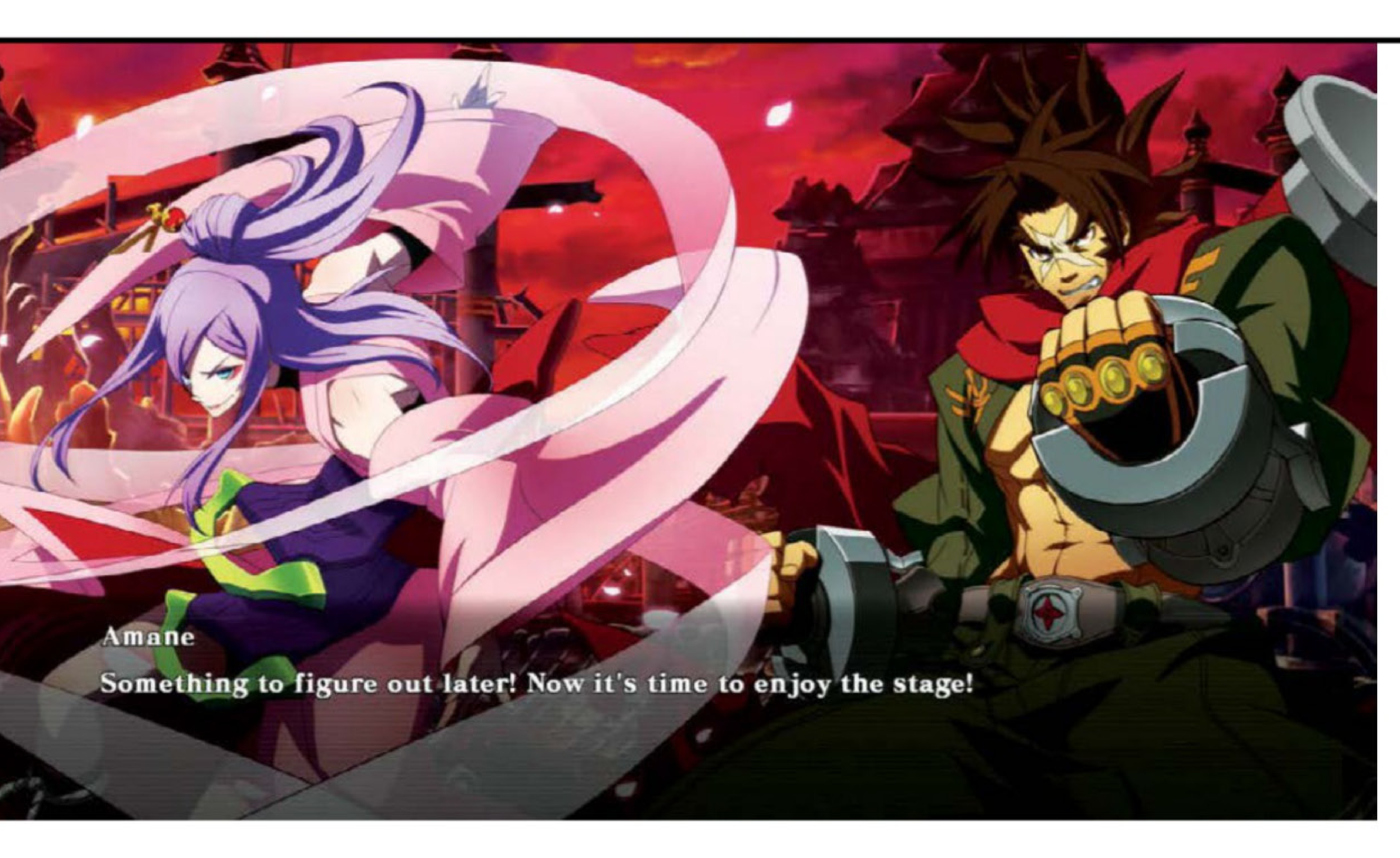
Above: The in-battle effects are so colourfully rendered, it borders on hurting your eyes. Here, Noel is about to unleash bullet hell on this werewolf-man. Obviously.





Right: Even the character select screen is nicely designed, with *BlazBlue*'s traditional Gothic designs subtly flourishing here and there, all knitted together with an ethereal colour scheme in keeping with the rest of the game's UI

THE JOY OF BLAZBLUE IS FIGURING OUT WHAT EACH CHARACTER'S GIMMICK IS, AND HOW IT CAN BE USED TO AUGMENT THEIR MOVESET



BETTER THAN

BATTLE FANTASIA



AS GOOD AS

STREET FIGHTER III: 3RD STRIKE

FAQs

Q. DOES IT REALLY LOOK THAT GOOD?
Yes – the animations on the sprites consistently amaze us.

Q. DOES MY FAVOURITE CHARACTER HANDLE DIFFERENTLY?
Probably, yes. Each character has been slightly rebalanced since *Continuum Shift Extend*, and new moves have been added.

Q. WHEN'S THE VITA VERSION OUT?
Summer, in America. We still don't have a European release.



WHEN YOU STARE INTO THE ABYSS, THE ABYSS STARES BACK

Introduced back in *Continuum Shift Extend*, the Abyss mode is one of the most compelling things about the newer *BlazBlue* games. Taking the form of a series of dungeons with randomly selected enemies and predefined bosses, the Abyss is a challenge to even the most hardened *BlazBlue* veteran. The RPG elements included in the mode make it more like a whole meta-game unto itself; you can purchase stat-enhancing auras to improve your chances of surviving the myriad waves of enemies that get thrown at you throughout the dungeons. Boosts like double speed or twice as much HP aren't available anywhere else in-game, making it worthwhile to visit Abyss, just for extra mechanics.



trick pony (use it effectively and you can 'Heat Up', though, increasing movement speed and projectile damage – something not to be sniffed at). Azrael, whose apparent power can match anyone in the *BlazBlue* universe (and that's saying something) can identify weak points on his opponents, making follow-up regular attacks do more damage. Kagura, unlocked after you've finished the sprawling and needlessly dialogue-heavy story mode, operates similarly to Siegfried from *Soul Calibur*, wielding a massive blade and using his Drive to activate various stances that can lead into unpredictable, violent, and incredibly powerful combos.

The inclusion of several new characters brings the total roster up to 24 playable fighters (with two extra characters available as DLC). Back in *Continuum Shift* (and its *Extend* Vita version), we dominated as Lambda-11 – the previous incarnation of Nu-13 – because her zoning Drives and strong close-combat moves kind of broke the other fighters. In *Chrono Phantasma*, the balancing has been adjusted enough to make sure no-one has a clear advantage over anyone else, and there is now such a variety of character types that you'd think Arc System Works would soon run out of ideas for their madcap fighter.

It's all brought to life with gorgeously animated 2D sprites, too, which really stand out in their colourful palettes against the game's hand-drawn backgrounds and environments. From the rose gardens of Rachel's castle to the living walls of the imposing Cauldron, *Chrono Phantasma* evokes the attention to detail you'd see in the old 2D fighters of generations past – something you just don't get in the modern 3D fighter. You're spurred on to try and finish each bout with your character's Astral Finish because, basically, it looks so *nice*. The anime animations and jaunty J-pop (or J-rock) soundtrack that comes on with each ultimate move is probably more rewarding than the instant death you inflict on your foe. The Distortion/Astral Finishes have always been satisfying, but with the *Chrono Phantasma* instalment, they seem to have been taken to their logical conclusion.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

A VARIED TROUPE: *BlazBlue*'s imaginative cast of characters is our favourite of any 2D fighter – the over-the-top designs and variation you'll come across trumps *Street Fighter* or *King Of Fighters* any day.

Chrono Phantasma is the best entry into the *BlazBlue* series we've played. With a wealth of in-game modes that'll take you forever to finish, as well as tight and enjoyable local- and online-multiplayer, alongside a slew of new mechanics and characters to get your teeth into, we feel we've only scratched the surface of *Chrono Phantasma*, and we've been playing it all week.

VERDICT 8/10
SOLID 2D FIGHTER WITH INCREDIBLE VISUALS

Right: Simple tasks, like mowing the lawn and making coffee, soon give way to more complex and bizarre challenges. A particular highlight involves clearing a room full of fairground games like whack-a-mole.





DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Young Horses
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 (co-op)
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

SURGEON SIMULATOR 2013



JUST LIKE



JAZZPUNK

WHO'S YOUR DADDY?

Octodad: Dadliest Catch

Self-service checkout machines are temperamental at the best of times. If you're an octopus in disguise, it's infinitely worse; these are the kind of moments Octodad dreads more than anything, with limbs like soup and the balance of a two year old. All he wants is to stay under the radar and live out a comfortable life with his human wife and two kids, and it's your job to guide him out of trouble, limb by limb. It's a unique premise that lends itself to a variety of humorous situations, as well as a greatly exaggerated physics engine that is all the rage these days.

Octodad's movements *do* feel finicky and unpredictable, with arm control assigned to the analogue sticks and each trigger lifting a single leg. It's a challenge just to walk in a straight line but, playing with a controller, it's possible to become strangely elegant as you fling your slippery legs up and down, gliding across the terrain. As you potter around the house, your family keep you company in cosy and enjoyable environments. Familiar family conversations are littered with Octodad's witty interjections in the form of octo-speak. His soft audio gurgles are accompanied by subtitles like *a confused and upset blub* or *a blub of forced casualness under duress*. It's strangely charming, to say the least.

Your family and members of the public keep a close eye on your actions – too much mess or peculiarity and they'll start questioning your credibility. A suspicion bar slowly builds as you trample into strangers, topple over furniture and generally hurl the world into disarray. Thankfully, menial household tasks are just a precursor to the real world, and you'll soon leave the house to explore large obstacle courses and a mixture of aquatic puzzles. Plus, the family pleasantness is often foiled by the presence of the angry chef making his comeback from the original *Octodad*, who is deeply agitated by your cephalopod origins. It's his apparent xenophobia for squid, alongside your wife's constant doubt at the authenticity of her marriage, which actually provide a surprising hint of emotional weight to an otherwise completely absurd experience.

But there are some frustrations, and not just with the fussy controls. Writhing appendages and floaty physics can often result in *Octodad* becoming wedged in the scenery or trapped between a wall and an immovable member of his family. Thankfully, this doesn't occur too often, and small inconsequential glitches almost feel welcome in the general spirit of the mayhem. One issue not so easily dismissed is the game's brevity, which will surely be under three hours for most players. Even when seeking out the tricky collectibles in each level, it's possible to see everything *Octodad* has to offer in a single afternoon, but if you are intrigued by a novel idea and bucketload of charm, *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* could easily squirm its way into your heart. You'll certainly be hard pressed to find anything else like it out there.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

TWO LEFT FEET: Co-op modes are nothing new, but *Octodad* provides yet more originality here by assigning each player to take control of a single limb. It's four players maximum, so humanoid limbs only





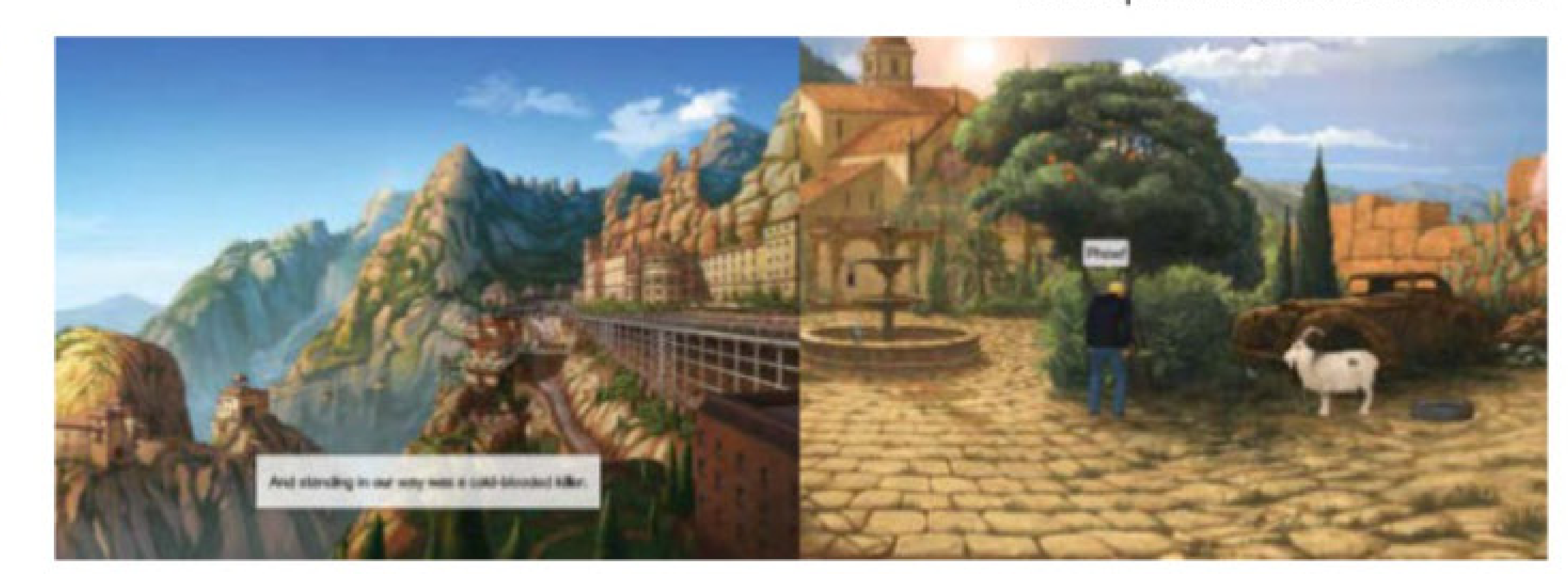


A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE IN EVERY WAY.

THE SUM OF ITS WHOLE

Broken Sword 5: The Serpent's Curse – Episode 2

Below: The combination of 2D backgrounds and 3D models continues to impress, and there's some glorious environments to explore. Revolution Software has really hit the spot for *Broken Sword* fans here.



Given that *Broken Sword 5: The Serpent's Curse* is no longer available in two parts, it feels a little contrived to critique only its ultimate half, but it seems that's how Revolution intended it to be experienced all the same. Truth be told the unnecessary severing of the game does leave a bitterness to it; returning for *Episode 2* means you'll have forgotten much of what the first episode was about. It also highlights some of the criticisms of *Episode 1*, such as the missing je ne sais quoi that makes a *Broken Sword* so compelling. In its latter half it's a much more direct return to form for George Stobbart who, outside of the initial inquest among the streets of Paris, is back chasing religious idols and assumed mythical powers. This is what *Broken Sword* should be.

What that really means is exotic locations, a lot more danger and a display of those supernatural elements that help bring the necessary historical mystery that the series has always been about. It's Charles Cecil proving he still has what it takes, returning the series to its absolute core. Though shorter than its first half – closing in at around five hours – *Episode 2* manages to cram in a wide range of vistas, characters and even some of the series' best (read: hardest) puzzles to date. Again this highlights the flaws of the previous outing but as an entire entity it's clear there's a greater curve to the difficult – and even ingenuity – of *Broken Sword 5*'s puzzles. Sadly *Episode 2* does peak in this regard a little too soon; an inevitable issue for any point-'n'-click game that relies on drawing you into its world and the tale it has to tell. Some of the latter puzzles feel haphazard and not nearly as refined as the Gnostic-fuelled sense of adventure the rest of the second episode features. Taken as a separate section, *Episode 2* does feel a little more linear than the series is used to. Regardless of the rushed pace, however, it doesn't do enough to sully what is an excellent achievement for Revolution Software. This is solid gold proof that Kickstarter can work.

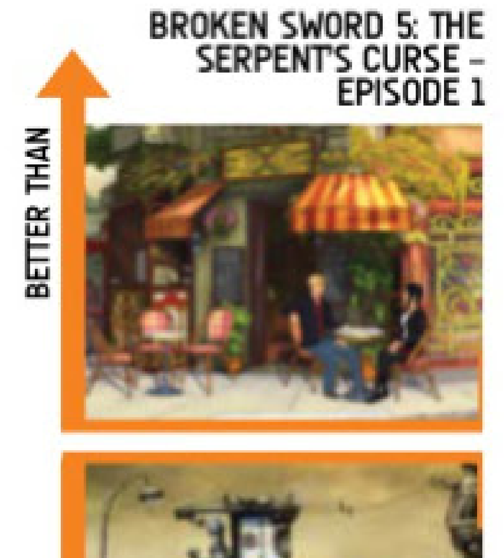
And that's really all that matters. Ignoring the developer's minor mistake with releasing *Broken Sword 5* in two parts, it's impossible to ignore that – as far as classic point-'n'-click adventures go – this is one of the best examples in recent times. Mercifully *Episode 2* makes up for the failings of the first, and as a whole this shouldn't be ignored by anyone who considers the genre dead. It's completely reminiscent of *The Shadow Of The Templars*, and that's intended as a great compliment – perhaps, dare we say it, it is even the best *Broken Sword* game since the original.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: iOS, Android, PS Vita
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Revolution Software
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £18.99
RELEASE: 16 April 2014
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 1.6 GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 256MB GPU, 7GB HDD Space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

BROKEN SWORD 5: THE SERPENT'S CURSE – EPISODE 1



AS GOOD AS



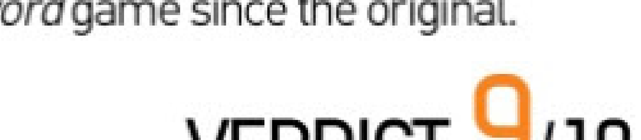
MACHINARIUM

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

GAME OF TWO HALVES It's unfortunate that Revolution Software released the game in two parts, but experienced as a whole this is an outstanding example of the series.

VERDICT



9/10

JUST WHAT KICKSTARTER BACKERS WILL HAVE WANTED





Above: The pacing of *Broken Sword 5* is impressive. It is able to channel *Indiana Jones* or *Da Vinci Code* in terms of mystery, intrigue and danger, and how the puzzles manage to tie it all together is very impressive indeed.

STRESS-TEST YOUR SQUARE BUTTON

Dynasty Warriors 8 Xtreme Legends
Complete Edition

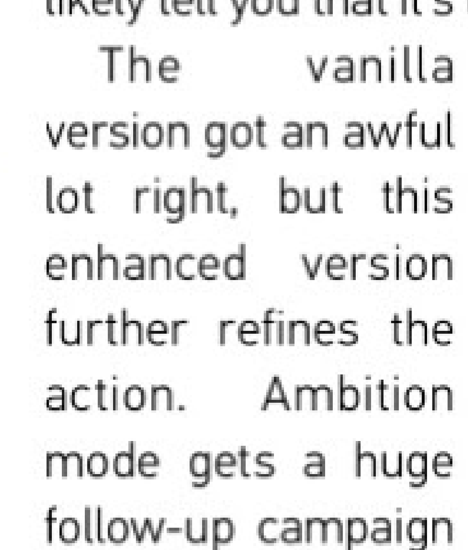
Above: Progress can be uploaded from the PS3 original then shared with the Vita version – we hope more games will do this.



DETAILS
FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Tecmo Koei
DEVELOPER: Omega Force
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN: BLADESTORM: THE HUNDRED YEARS WAR

JUST LIKE: DYNASTY WARRIORS 8



After nearly fifteen years of *Dynasty Warriors* as we know it, it must be reaching the point where Omega Force is running out of Three Kingdoms inspiration. Every major character is already in the game; every notable battle is represented; each faction has seen its own timeline play out countless times. But just as EA isn't simply going to pull the plug on FIFA purely because it has already done football to death, the *Warriors* franchise can force its way over this content hump by continually iterating with new gameplay and a few clever twists on established elements. While it might take a trained eye to distinguish it from previous games, those who know their Musou will most likely tell you that it's the best one yet.

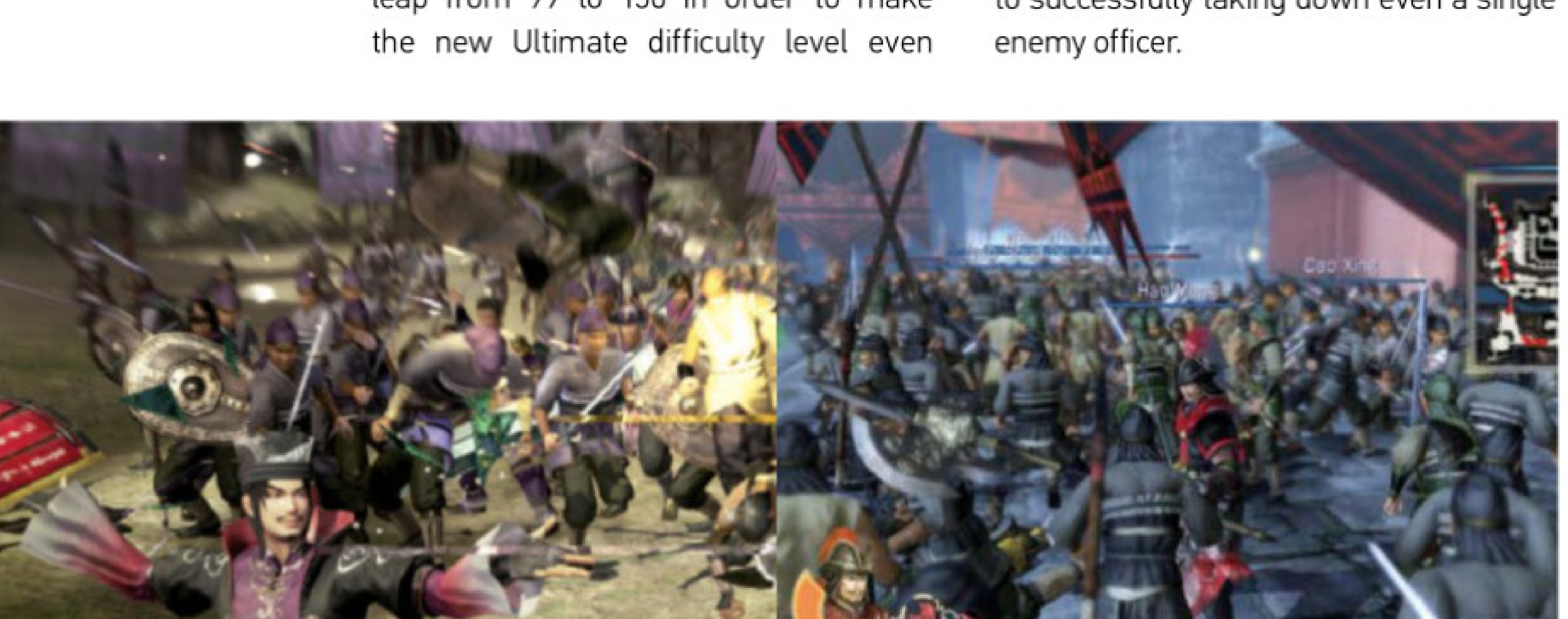
The vanilla version got an awful lot right, but this enhanced version further refines the action. Ambition mode gets a huge follow-up campaign alongside the existing one, while the addition of a second EX attack for each character makes general combat that little bit more interesting. Level caps also leap from 99 to 150 in order to make the new Ultimate difficulty level even more challenging – the popular preconception of the series as a festival of button-mashing is torn apart by these top-end difficulties, where quick thinking, weapon switching, efficient move set usage and excellent evasion are all key to successfully taking down even a single enemy officer.

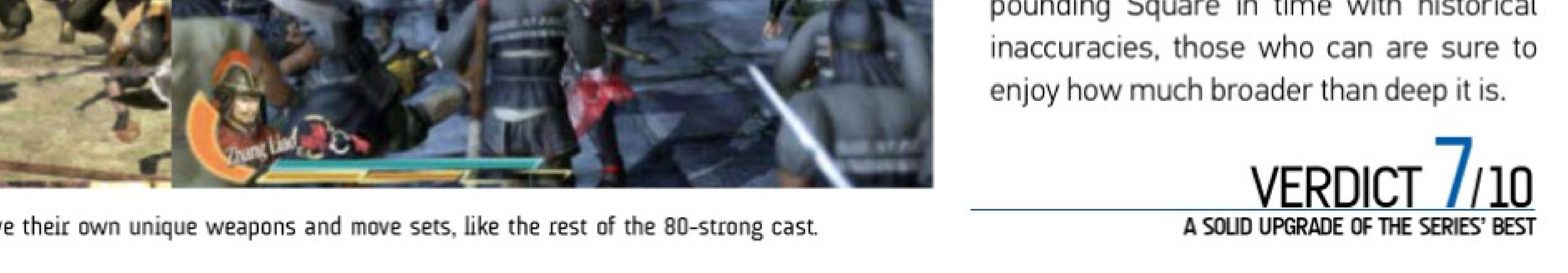
MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

HISTORY ITSELF With only minor improvements between the *Warriors* games, it's little wonder fatigue set in. This is one of the best, but it's still ultimately the same game we've been playing for over a decade.

The jump to a new console hasn't done all that much for visuals in general, but the game is undoubtedly neater and smoother than it once was. In addition, most of the extra power seems to have been used in upping the number of troops on-screen, with some areas and maps more densely packed than the front few rows at a One Direction show – in some cases, it's almost too much and you literally can't see what's going on, let alone who you're supposed to be Squaring to death.

With the ability to continue from your PS3 save data and Trophies geared entirely around the new content, you're looking at another 100-hour Platinum even if you aced the original game. While some still won't be able to get over the fact that it's apparently just a game about pounding Square in time with historical inaccuracies, those who can are sure to enjoy how much broader than deep it is.





Above: The five new characters all have their own unique weapons and move sets, like the rest of the 80-strong cast.

VERDICT 7/10
A SOLID UPGRADE OF THE SERIES' BEST

THOSE WHO CANNOT REMEMBER THE PAST...

Moebius: Empire Rising

The danger of harking after a classic era of gaming is that we tend to forget how much annoyance we were willing to put up with at the time. Take the point-and-click adventure. Once the foremost genre for telling stories, we often overlook just how clunky they sometimes were as actual games.

Kickstarted successes such as Double Fine's *Broken Age* and the new *Broken Sword* from Charles Cecil at least tried to bring the genre up to date. Not so *Moebius: Empire Rising* from that other stalwart of the P&C's 'golden' era, Jane Jensen.

The tale is of Malachi Rector, an antiquities dealer with issues, recruited by a mysterious government agency to find people who have 'connections' with historical figures. Joined by retired military muscle David Walker, the duo race against time to find someone to marry a US presidential candidate and save the world (ostensibly) before someone else kills her.

Unfortunately, *Moebius* all too often feels like an interesting story in search of a better medium by which to be told. The technological limitations of an old-school adventure game hinder a plot that had potential to present an engaging mystery, and characters in need of a less restrictive format to become fully fleshed out.

Nowhere are these limitations more apparent than with the two leads. As the uptight Rector and all-American action boy Walker's stilted bromance develops, the increasing fear is that the obvious hints of homosexuality will be played for laughs. However, as the story rolls on, it's handled with a surprising degree of maturity in that it isn't either a major shock to everyone around or portrayed as a punchline. Kudos to the writer. Unfortunately, this is so hampered by the truly awful character models and animation that attempts at presenting genuine emotion are unintentionally laughable.

The other limitation that stops *Moebius*' otherwise interesting story developing is that at no point is it ever particularly challenging as an actual game. There are flashes of originality, such as when Rector is 'analysing' a suspect or item, adding something of a Sherlockian feel to proceedings. But never do you come across any mind-bending puzzles, anything to challenge the grey matter. It's usually just a case of patiently clicking on every single option you can find until you're allowed to move on to the next scene.

Ultimately, *Moebius* suffers from being too faithful to its old-school roots and serves as a useful reminder as to why we began to fall out of love with the genre in the first place. *Moebius*' story may be a lesson in the dangers of reliving history through a modern lens, but it's a lesson that the development team have failed to learn themselves.

DETAILS

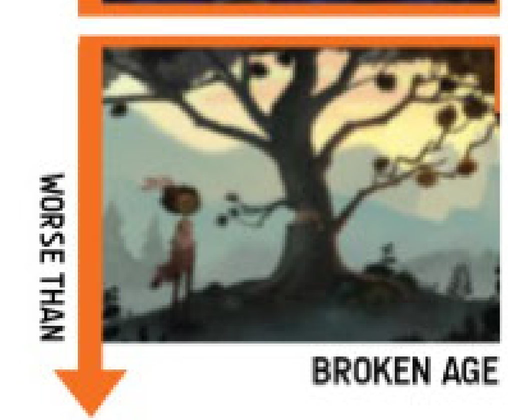
FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Phoenix Online Publishing
DEVELOPER: Pinkerton Road Studio
PRICE: £22.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2.0 GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, Video card with 512MB RAM, 4GB HD
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN



LEISURE SUIT LARRY: RELOADED

WORSE THAN



BROKEN AGE

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

STYLE IT OUT: The entire game needs to find its own visual identity rather than looking like it was put together out of stock models found in 3ds Max and cobbled together by a team of interns.



VERDICT 5/10

A GOOD STORY HAMPERED BY SHODDY CONSTRUCTION



Below: Where the game occasionally shines (other than in the writing) is when you are called on to channel your inner Sherlock to correctly analyse people, objects and – given that you play an antiques expert – *objects d'art*.





Above: While the backgrounds are generally very picturesque, it's the character models and animation that let everything down and stand in the way of absorbing you in proceedings.



Left: The art style of *Ether One* adds to its ability to captivate. A sort of *Borderlands*-esque design to the world gives it a certain personality that brings a little bit of character to Pinwheel that perhaps wouldn't have existed otherwise.



Right: It's only possible to carry one item at a time, so you must teleport back to the 'Case' where items you consider valuable can be located at another point. It's never clear when an item is useful or junk, so you'll come here often.

EASY TO REMEMBER

Ether One

For a game as refreshing as *Ether One*, it seems unfair to boil it down to a simple comparison: *Myst* meets *Gone Home*. The premise here is an intriguing one; you are a Restorer, tasked with entering a patient's mind to relive their memories in the hopes of curing the dementia infecting their mind and ensuring the scientific research can continue. It's clear almost immediately that all is not as it seems with *Ether One*, however, and this central mystery is surprisingly strong enough not only to draw you in, but to keep you enthralled throughout. You're not just discovering the truth behind the patient, though, but behind yourself, behind the memory restoration company and even the scientist that has put you up to the job. It all intertwines beautifully, and keeps that desire to see more ticking along nicely.

Which is just as well, because *Ether One* is a game that rewards the inquisitive. At its very base level all you're required to do is locate a series of collectible ribbons dotted throughout Pinwheel, a small, fictional, industrial town in Cornwall. With these in hand you can experience a 'core' memory, and ultimately reach the end of the game. It's simple enough and if that's all you choose to do, then you likely won't have too difficult a time doing it. While you will learn about Pinwheel, your patient Jean and more simply by collecting these, there's always a sense that you're missing out on vital information. Each area also comes with a selection of projectors, and while optional these can only be restored by solving a puzzle of some manner. It's never explained neither what the solution is nor even the problem to begin with, which in fact makes *Ether One* all the more rewarding. A puzzle solved is done so through your own inert desire to explore, to uncover secrets and – all being well – put the pieces together successfully enough to stumble onto a solution.

In this regard you'll have to know what you're getting into; the slow pace and required rummaging could put off as many as it impresses. It's sadly invigorating that such a simple idea – which, for a cheap reference point, is akin to *Myst*'s directionless design – empowers an adventure game in an era where puzzles are more often overtly spelt out to the gamer. *Ether One* respects its players, and though you're never told all that much if you have that intrepid sense of mystery you'll feel as though you're missing something if you don't search every drawer, press every button and try to solve every puzzle. It might not appeal to everyone, but *Ether One* is an exceptional example of what can be done with simple game design. It has a quality not commonly seen in smaller indie titles, and the courage to do things a little differently.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: White Paper Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2.2 GHz Dual-Core CPU, 4GB RAM, Shader Model 3 compatible GPU, 3GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

WORSE THAN: THE STANLEY PARABLE

AS GOOD AS: GONE HOME

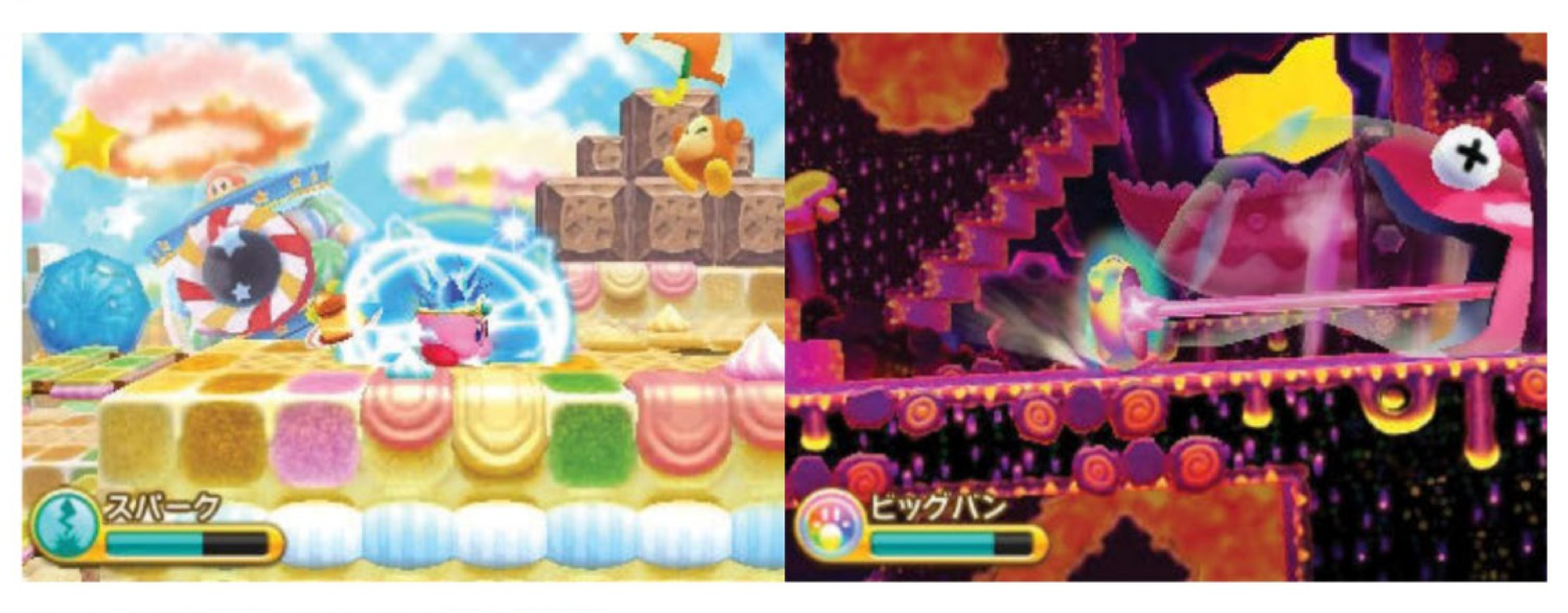
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

FREEFORM THINKING Though areas of Pinwheel are unlocked, you are free to explore and discover the environment – and solve its puzzles – in a manner that you're comfortable with.


VERDICT 8/10

AN ADVENTURE GAME ONLY FOR THE INQUISITIVE



Left: The sense of scale conveyed by the game's colourful visuals is impressive – enemies designed to be taken on with Hypernova are huge. They take no more effort to beat than regular goons, but they make a big impression.

AN ALL-YOU-CAN-INHALE BUFFET

Kirby Triple Deluxe

It's not often that Virtual Boy software is a useful point of reference for a modern release, but *Kirby Triple Deluxe* shares a number of similarities with the most celebrated game on Nintendo's forgotten console. *Virtual Boy Wario Land* was a 2D platformer that used the 3D capabilities of its doomed host hardware to allow Wario to travel between the foreground and background, and frequently required him to cope with attacks from both. *Kirby Triple Deluxe* applies the same designs to Kirby's brand of platforming.

It's clear that the development team has thought carefully about how to implement the plane-switching, as interaction between the two play areas is frequently employed and always adds value to the design. As an example, Kirby's cannon hat allows the player to destroy objects in the background while continuing with the foreground platforming action. Other sections see Kirby racing background enemies carrying key objects and leaping across platforms connected to others across the planes. These designs enhance Kirby's exploratory platforming action and show off the visual capabilities of the 3DS.

The other new additions are some light accelerometer usage and the Hypernova form, in which Kirby's suction abilities are greatly enhanced. This is mostly used for moving blocks in simple puzzle sections, as well as some set-pieces in which Kirby inhales impressively large enemies. Neither addition brings quite the same wide array of new level design options as the plane-switching, but are relatively infrequently deployed and never outstay their welcome.

Kirby Triple Deluxe adds five new copy abilities to those returning from the previous games, with the new attacks themed around archery and circus skills. They provide for some rather satisfying combat, a fact reflected in the team's choice to include a multiplayer battle mode that uses them. Unfortunately the variety doesn't quite hold for the whole game, as the later part of Kirby's quest is a boss rush that wore on our patience while barely denting our life counter. It's a minor criticism that leads to our more substantial bugbear – like so many of its forebears, *Kirby Triple Deluxe* poses a weak challenge. While there's a little longevity in finding all of the sun stones that open up extra stages, it's notable that even the final boss was defeated without us losing a life. Still, this is a high-quality platformer packed with variety – if you don't mind a pushover, you'll find plenty to like.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: HAL Laboratory
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: 16 May
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

PLANE-SWITCH: Kirby's jaunts into the background use 3D well and provide new design opportunities
HYPERNOVA: This vacuum ability adds some pretty standard puzzle elements, but add welcome variety


VERDICT 7/10

TOO EASY, BUT NEVER DULL



Above: Attacks from the background such as ski-jumping enemies and speeding trains are used to convey depth, and succeed in doing so – this is a game best played with 3D on.

IF YOU THOUGHT HADOUKENS WERE ODD...

JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: All-Star Battle

We're going to place a pretty solid bet here that not many of you know that this new *JoJo's* game was created as part of a 25th anniversary celebration of the entire *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* franchise. It's massive in Japan, up there with the *Bleach*'s and *Naruto*'s and all the *Dragon Ball Z*'s that you've probably heard of. It's also been coupled with a new anime adaptation, currently in its second series, that has a lot of serious money and talent behind it. It's huge and this game is a big deal and about seven people in the West are even aware it exists.

It's a fighting game much like the recently re-released Dreamcast one of old, only this time instead of fighting game master Capcom at the helm we've got fan-favourite CyberConnect2 developing; it's known for making the *Naruto* fighting games of recent years. While the *Naruto* entries are a bit rubbish, they are slathered in delicious fan service which masks the bland taste of the gameplay. This is par for the course in most of these licensed manga/anime games and *JoJo's* really isn't much of an exception to this rule.

The sheer volume and density of the source material can make it quite impenetrable to some and while it's not at the *Dynasty Warriors Gundam* series' level of absurdity, there's still twenty-something years of a weekly comic that's accounted for in the game. This includes eight *JoJo's*, fighting ghosts in bondage gear and almost-naked immortal Aztec dudes that eat vampires. It wouldn't really be that bad if it wasn't for the fact that a lot of these concepts change the way each character fights. While you can have Jonathan as a Hamon user go up against Jotaro with his Stand, it's not always clear what that exactly means to your average game. These styles are at least labelled on the character select screen so once you do understand how each system works you won't need to know the difference between proper breathing and za warudo to have a basic understanding of most of the characters.

If you are a fan though this depth and level of content is enough to reduce you to a wobbling heap of joy. Each part of the manga is faithfully

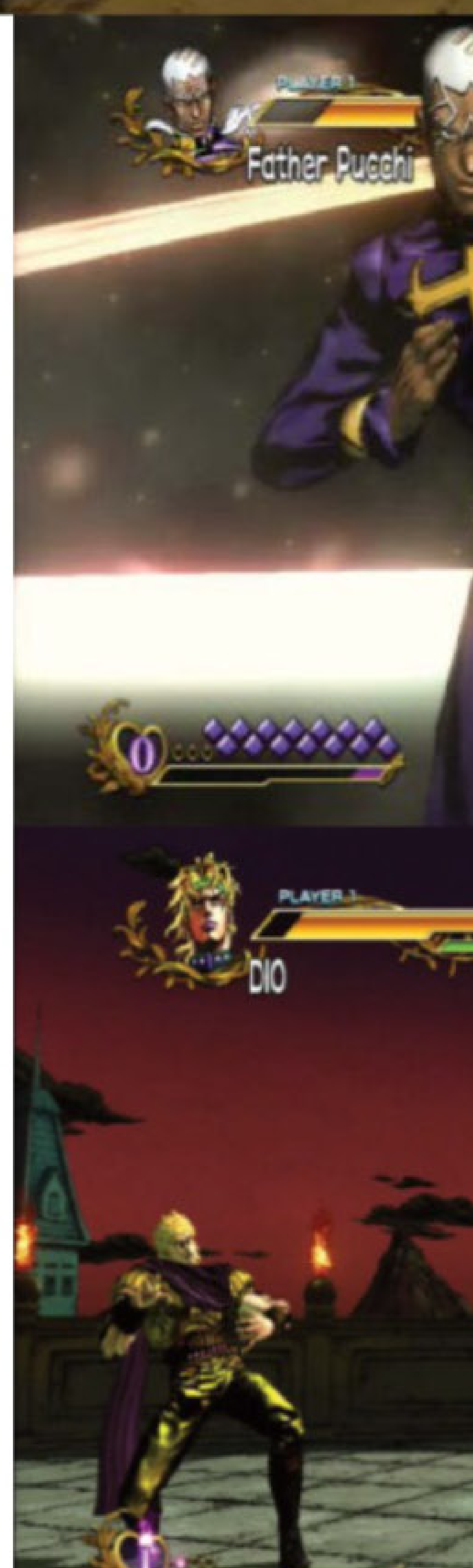
DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco Games
DEVELOPER: CyberConnect2
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Now
PLAYERS: 2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



Above: The game is beautiful, with characters and moves faithfully reproduced in a gorgeous cel-shaded style that suits the style of the manga. Below: Like his manga counterpart, Joseph can predict his foes' taunts, which is expressed in-game as an appropriate counter-move that temporarily stuns and reduces super metre.





COMICS VS MANGA

The fighting system is very reminiscent of the relatively recent *Marvel Vs Capcom 3*, utilising a three-hit weak-medium-heavy attack combo that can be cancelled into a special move and ultimately a super attack. It makes it pretty easy to get stuck in with, especially when you take into account all the characters making use of Ryu's patented hadouken and dragon punch motions to unleash attacks that put a simple hurricane kick to shame. Combo chains don't get as ridiculously long and Earth shattering in *JoJo's* though and due to the recharge rate of most characters super metre you won't be pulling them off as part of every combo; it does slow down the fighting a little bit but considering that *Marvel* moves at ludicrous speed it's quite a welcome change of pace.





FAQs

Q. ESIDISI OR AC/DC?
Due to possibly copyright infringement, a lot of the names which reference bands and songs are slightly changed or spelt differently

Q. ENGLISH VOICE OPTION?
No it's subs all the way. On the brightside the Japanese voices are the same as those used in the current anime

Q. WHAT'S MUDA AND ORA?
They're catchphrases of baddie Dio and some of the *JoJo's* respectively. Muda means futile or pointless, while ora is just a yell

represented with individual story modes that distil each section down to their core fights with the available characters, complete with relevant dialogue, fabulous poses and accurate plot-contrivances. While this leaves parts one and six with very few fights – three in the case of six – they all come with show-accurate special conditions and secret bonuses for pulling off appropriate moves. The secret missions are only hinted at and require a bit of knowledge of the manga, and possibly a couple of playthroughs, to get them all.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

PHANTOM BLOOD The West has never officially received an adaptation beyond part three, *Stardust Crusaders*, so this is our first proper look at some of the other absolutely bonkers stories.

The story mode serves to unlock the rest of the games characters, of which there are 32 across the eight parts. For newcomers who want to learn why exactly a priest covets a green baby idol thing so much, it's a great excuse for learning the basic story while trying out some of the different characters and styles to figure out what clicks and what doesn't. You'll be done in about six hours and there'll still be enough story-wise to dive into the manga or anime without having much spoiled. There are status items you can buy before each fight to make it slightly easier for yourself but we rarely found that we truly needed them throughout the story. The game gets tough and some characters are a bit difficult to use but the matches never quite get impossible.

While a lot of the difficulty issues are confined to the short story mode, some of the character awkwardness bleeds into the multiplayer. As a fighting game it's really not that well balanced, with some characters having really slow charge up time on special moves that heavily limit combos and frankly make playing as specific characters quite frustrating. This isn't even counting the handful of characters that don't use the two more 'normal' fighting styles within the game. People will find their preferred characters like in any fighting game but it really seems to push you to certain characters and character types.

Unlike other modern fighting games, the roster is being bulked out by nine extra free DLC characters. These are currently coming out in pairs of two along with campaign DLC which adds extra chapters to the story where fights had been missing, as well as bulking out the slightly odd campaign mode. Here, you gamble regenerating energy pellets to find characters before fighting them. There's a system where you need to defeat them over several bouts while betting energy pellets to deal more damage but there's very little use for it outside of unlocking more fabulous clothes and back-breaking poses for the characters.

THIS DEPTH AND LEVEL OF CONTENT IS ENOUGH TO REDUCE FANS TO WOBBLING HEAPS OF JOY

All of these issues are very much tempered by what the game is meant to be: it's not the next great Evo game and it was never really setting out to do that. It's a mile-long love letter to the fans of a beloved manga series that have wanted to see a proper *JoJo's* fighting game for over 15 years, and it delivers this by the bucket load. For the rest though, it's a curious-yet-fun novelty with a simple fighting system and laughably over-the-top special moves. You should know on which side you fall.



Above: The online mode pulls off the now-popular card and profile approach pretty well with character specific quotes and portraits coupled with other *JoJo*-based terms. The netcode isn't the best though and some players use that to their advantage. Left: You can see their stripes and you know they're clean.



FLAMBOYANT FAN SERVICE

Below: The new items need to be used with some thought, as a bad deployment will leave your score looking rather pitiful. Unlike in *Mario Kart*, item boxes clearly display what you'll receive, so forward planning is possible.





DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Camelot Software Planning
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: 2 May
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
FUN! FUN! MINIGOLF TOUCH!



JUST LIKE
EVERYBODY'S GOLF (PS VITA)

AROUND THE WORLD IN 18 HOLES

Mario Golf World Tour

For those of you that haven't been counting, it's been a decade since Nintendo's stalwart plumber last picked up a set of clubs – after accomplished Gamecube and Game Boy Advance outings, *Mario Golf* skipped the successors to both systems. This isn't apparent when playing *Mario Golf World Tour* – as you hit your first drive in Peach Gardens and hear the familiar theme borrowed from *Mario Kart DS*, it becomes clear that dependability and familiarity are the watchwords here, as is so often the case with *Mario* games.

If you've played an arcade golf game before, you'll be in familiar enough territory to skip the pleasingly comprehensive tutorials and get into the action. For most players, that will mean starting the Castle Club mode, in which you play as a Mii and establish a handicap before taking on a series of tournaments. It's a brief affair, taking place across the three most conservatively designed courses in the game, and you'll see the credits roll within a few hours. While Castle Club affords you the chance to customise your Mii by buying new clothing and equipment, items must be unlocked before purchase and the process is painfully slow. It all feels rather weak.

Thankfully, the majority of the game's content is to be found outside of Castle Club mode. While the *Mario*-themed courses are accessible via Castle Club, they are barely integrated into the mode and can't be unlocked through it. These courses resemble those of previous *Mario Golf* instalments, complete with the fanciful elements common to *Mario* sports games – pipes to shoot your ball further, dash pads to send the ball skidding across the fairway, and the debuting item boxes. Much like in the *Mario Kart* series, these bestow single-use items that provide effects such as perfectly straight shots and boomerang curves. Each of these six courses is a pleasure to complete, although unfortunately they only offer nine holes each.

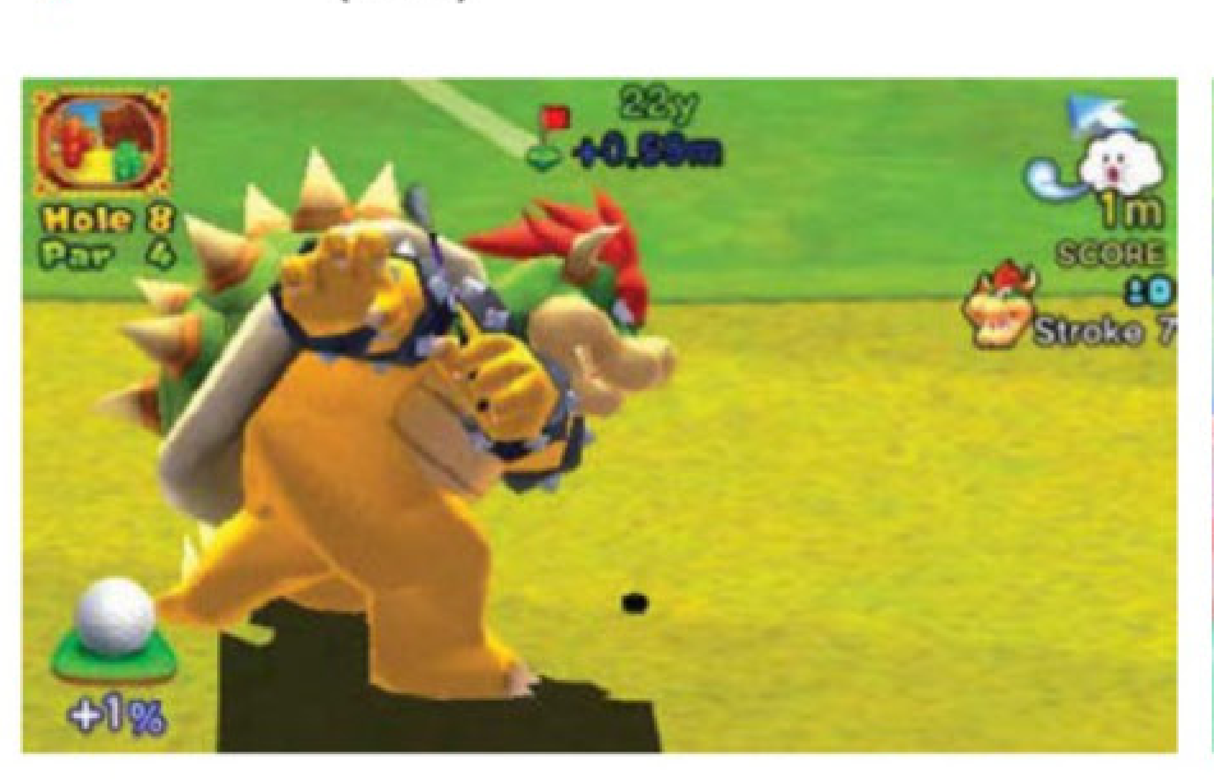
To unlock those courses, you'll need to complete the challenge mini-games, of which each course offers ten. The challenges take a variety of forms, from coin-collecting to playing holes against the clock, and range from the trivial to the infuriating. They're generally good fun although rather repetitive – most courses offer the same challenge types, and regularly feature two or three of the same type. These challenges also represent the quickest way to unlock new items for the Castle Club mode, which does make us wonder why the challenges weren't just integrated into that mode in the first place.

None of *Mario Golf World Tour*'s changes are revolutionary – ten years away has brought surprisingly few new ideas – but the core gameplay is just as fun and attractive as ever, so if you're looking for a golf game for the 3DS, this will do just fine.

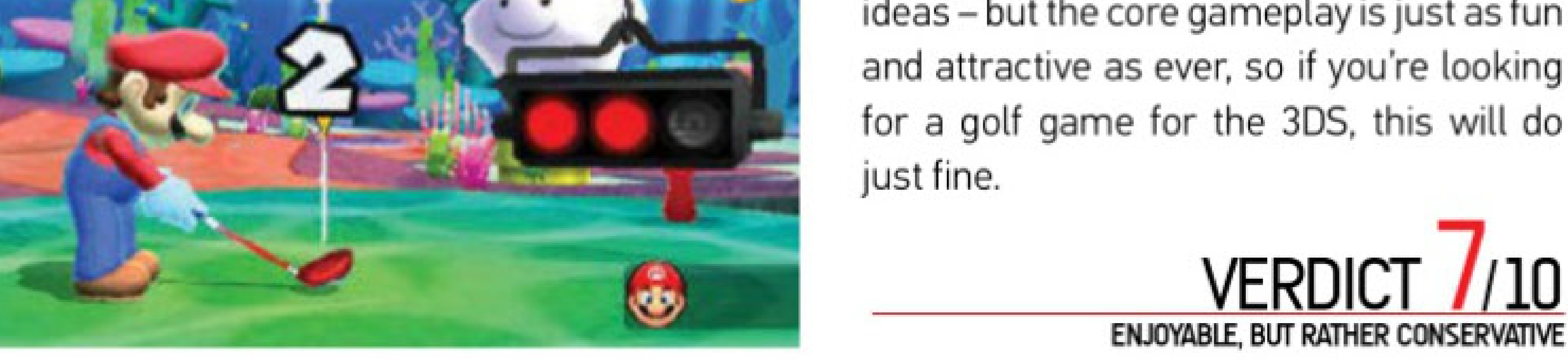
ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

ITEM BOXES: Common to *Mario*'s other spin-offs but making their golf debut, these give players additional shot options. They're plentiful, and since they're not allocated at random they'll commonly prove helpful.







VERDICT 7/10
ENJOYABLE, BUT RATHER CONSERVATIVE



Left: Elemental attacks have been brought into *Lost Swords*, with opposing elementals making it easier to smash your opponent's armour, which is the key to nabbing item drops and character unlock keys.

THE GAME THAT DOESN'T WANT YOU TO PLAY

SoulCalibur: Lost Swords

It's the spinning hourglass that ruins it. You may have seen the words 'free-to-play' and braced yourself against news of overly aggressive sales pitches, the result of Bandai Namco slimming down core elements of the series before asking players to flesh out the bones with in-game purchases. *SoulCalibur: Lost Swords* does suffer from that but it's that spinning hourglass, the only sign of life on each loading screen as *SoulCalibur: Lost Swords* lethargically pumps data back and forth from Bandai Namco's servers, that drags this experience to a crawl.

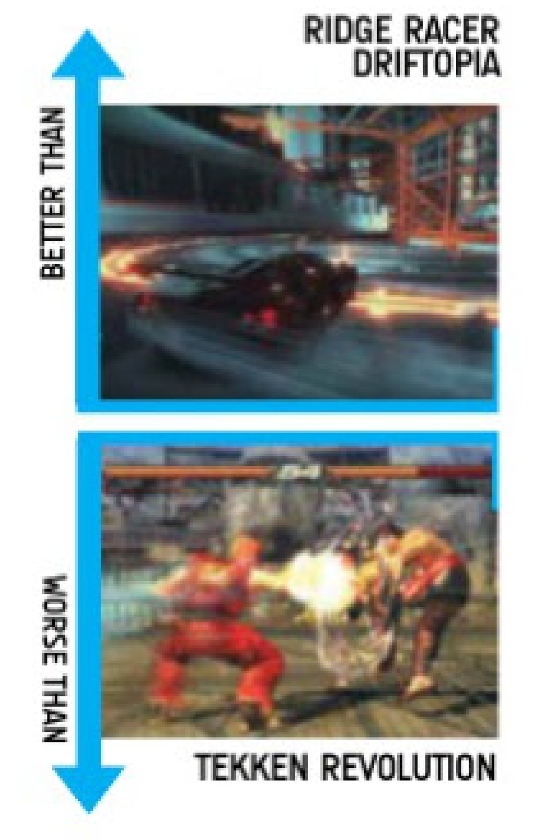
That's a shame because there's much here to admire. *Lost Swords* uses the foundation of *SoulCalibur V* to build upon the same core gameplay, stages, music and characters but extra mechanics have been thrown in. Each quest begins with you selecting one of three computer-controlled allies, plucked from a selection of other players, who can be summoned for a brief period during battle. It's too awkward to open up any juicy tag combo potential but instead works well a life-bar management tactic, allowing you to tag in a fresh body to try and reverse the momentum of battle while your main fighter takes a breather.

There's also an item crafting system that provides the main impetus behind progression. You craft elemental attributes to your weapons from item drops, which leads to further item drops, which lead back to more crafting. Thus the cycle continues. It's a little undercooked and perhaps too engineered towards making you open your wallets to speed up your quest, but even so, it's a step up on *SoulCalibur V*'s weak single-player.

However the potential here is limited by the fact you can't just get stuck in and play. There's an AP cost for each quest and AP slowly recharges over time, meaning there will be times when you have to twiddle your thumbs and wait. It's an annoying and frustrating model for free-to-play games and *Lost Swords* is no exception. But it's the constant loading screens that really frustrate, forcing you to watch a spinning hourglass. Every match, every menu, seemingly every button press is followed by the spinning hourglass. It discourages you from crafting or tweaking your character, from training mode, sometimes even from playing. And finally, to top it all off – there's no multiplayer. Madness. At times, *Lost Swords* feels like an experiment to try new mechanics, other times it feels like the whole project could (and perhaps should) have shown up as *SoulCalibur V* DLC. Either way, rather than being encouraged to play, it often feels like Bandai Namco is actively discouraging you from *Lost Swords*.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER: Project Soul
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



BETTER THAN: RIDGE RACER DRIFTOPIA

WORSE THAN: TEKKEN REVOLUTION

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

SOUL ARMY Although you can't play against other players, your character will be uploaded to Bandai Namco's servers for other players to use as their 'ally' in quests. A nice mechanic but one that needs more player feedback to have any sort of impact.



VERDICT 5/10
INTERESTING AT BEST, HIGHLY FRUSTRATING AT WORST



Above: Some gameplay mechanics have been removed, such as Just Guard and ring-outs. Both remove some of the subtlety of *SoulCalibur*'s tactics.

A GENTLEMAN'S SPORT

Don Bradman Cricket 14

Below: Neat little flourishes like the inclusion of a hawkeye camera for appeals firmly add to the realistic nature of the game.

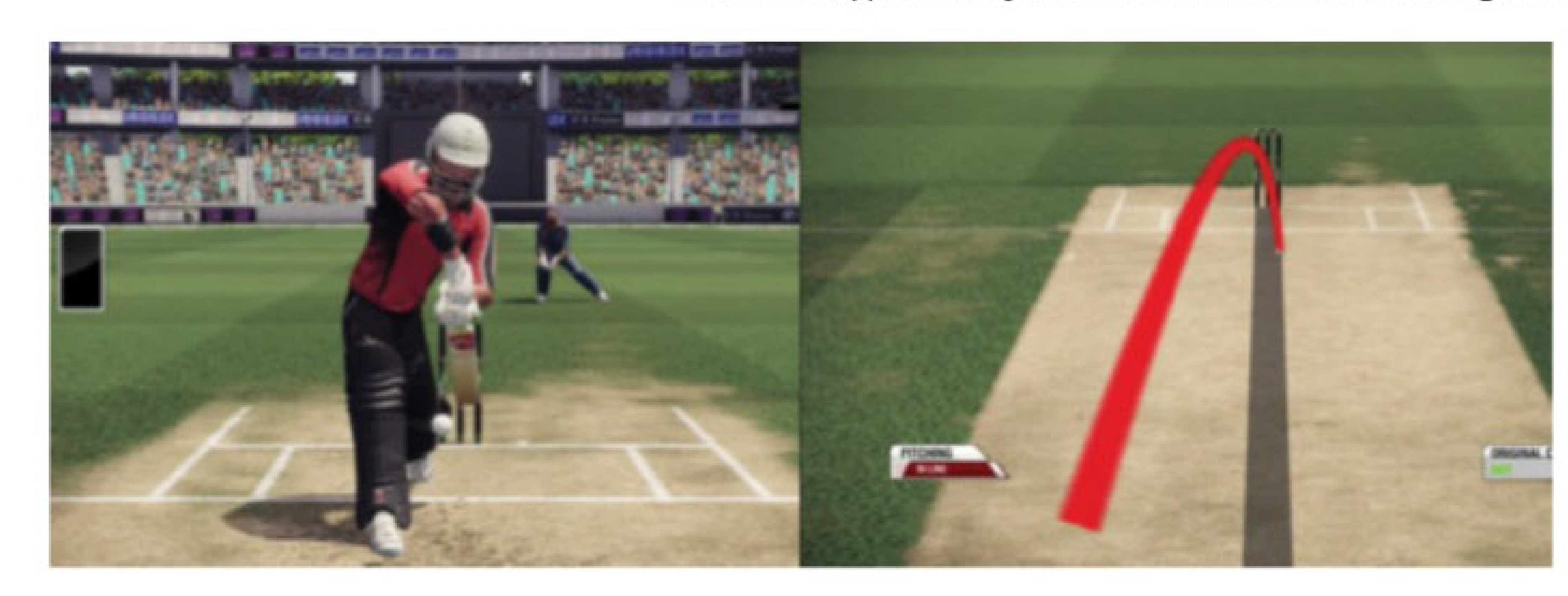
Far from the likes of football, basketball and tennis, cricket releases are few and far between in the modern market. *Don Bradman Cricket* comes from Australian developer Big Ant, and corners the market following the hiatus of the popular yet flawed Codemasters' *Brian Lara* cricket series.

It is worth mentioning straight away that, maybe due to the developer's relative inexperience or lack of proper funding, the visuals in *Don Bradman Cricket* are weak compared to other contemporary sports releases. Textures are bland and character models are lacking in detail, with certain animations proving buggy and underdeveloped. This is no more apparent than when creating a player to take through a Career mode, with model design looking, at times, like they could be PS2-era. The Career mode itself though is the bread and butter of this game, as it throws the player into different match types (tests, ODIs, T20) and represents a genuine cricket season.

What *Don Bradman Cricket* lacks in visuals and model design it more than makes up for in terms of realism and mechanics. This is perhaps the most accurate cricket experience available in videogames, marrying a great knowledge of the sport to sheer technicality. There are four pages of control commands in the game's manual, and this observation goes some way towards articulating how complicated *Don Bradman Cricket* can be.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: Australia
PUBLISHER: Tru Blu Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Big Ant Studios
PRICE: £42.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



BETTER THAN: BRIAN LARA CRICKET 2007



WORSE THAN: FIFA 14

This title's comprehension of the sport is both a blessing and a curse when it comes to recommending it, as its complex nature will, for the most part, only appeal to the true cricket enthusiast. Though playing a four-day test match in near enough real time will appeal to some, there is no getting around the fact that the game can slip into mundanity after an extended period of time. Once more this comes down to the player's feelings towards the sport, but it just lacks the immediacy and excitement of a game like *FIFA*.

Although comparing this game to EA's behemoth football franchise is unorthodox, parallels between the two can be seen in the love and care that Big Ant has put into recreating an authentic experience. Whether it's through pressing Up on the D-pad to appeal an umpiring decision or the shouts of "well bowled" from your teammates upon bowling a maiden over, all the individual facets of the sport are available.

It is strong, then, when it comes to emulating cricket, and gameplay mechanics are better than anything we've seen from cricket games over the last few years. However, the so-called 'budget' feel that permeates the title detracts from an otherwise decent effort. With more cash behind it, this could become *the* cricket franchise, but for now, more work is needed to make this a reality.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

VISUALS As mentioned, the visual output in *Don Bradman Cricket* is below the levels you might expect from a sports sim in 2014, and so future games in the series could do with an overhaul.

VERDICT 6/10

NEEDS A POLISH, BUT COMPREHENSIVE IN ITS DELIVERY



Above: The bowling system takes some getting used to, as inputs are recorded from the start of your run-up and directly impact the flight of the ball.



LESS IS MORE

NES Remix 2

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Indieszero
PRICE: £8.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

As well as it collected some of the most iconic games on Nintendo's 8-bit hardware, the original *NES Remix* omitted many more that made the system a cultural icon. The likes of *Super Mario Bros 3*, *Metroid* and *Punch-Out!!* were all missing from the original compilation, ensuring that *NES Remix 2* was inevitable.

The line-up of games is slightly slimmer this time around, featuring 12 titles in comparison to the 16 of its predecessor. In addition to the three games mentioned above, the likes of *Dr Mario*, *Kirby's Adventure* and *Kid Icarus* make appearances. The titles featured are generally amongst the later, more complex NES games that have aged gracefully, instantly giving *NES Remix 2* an edge over the original.

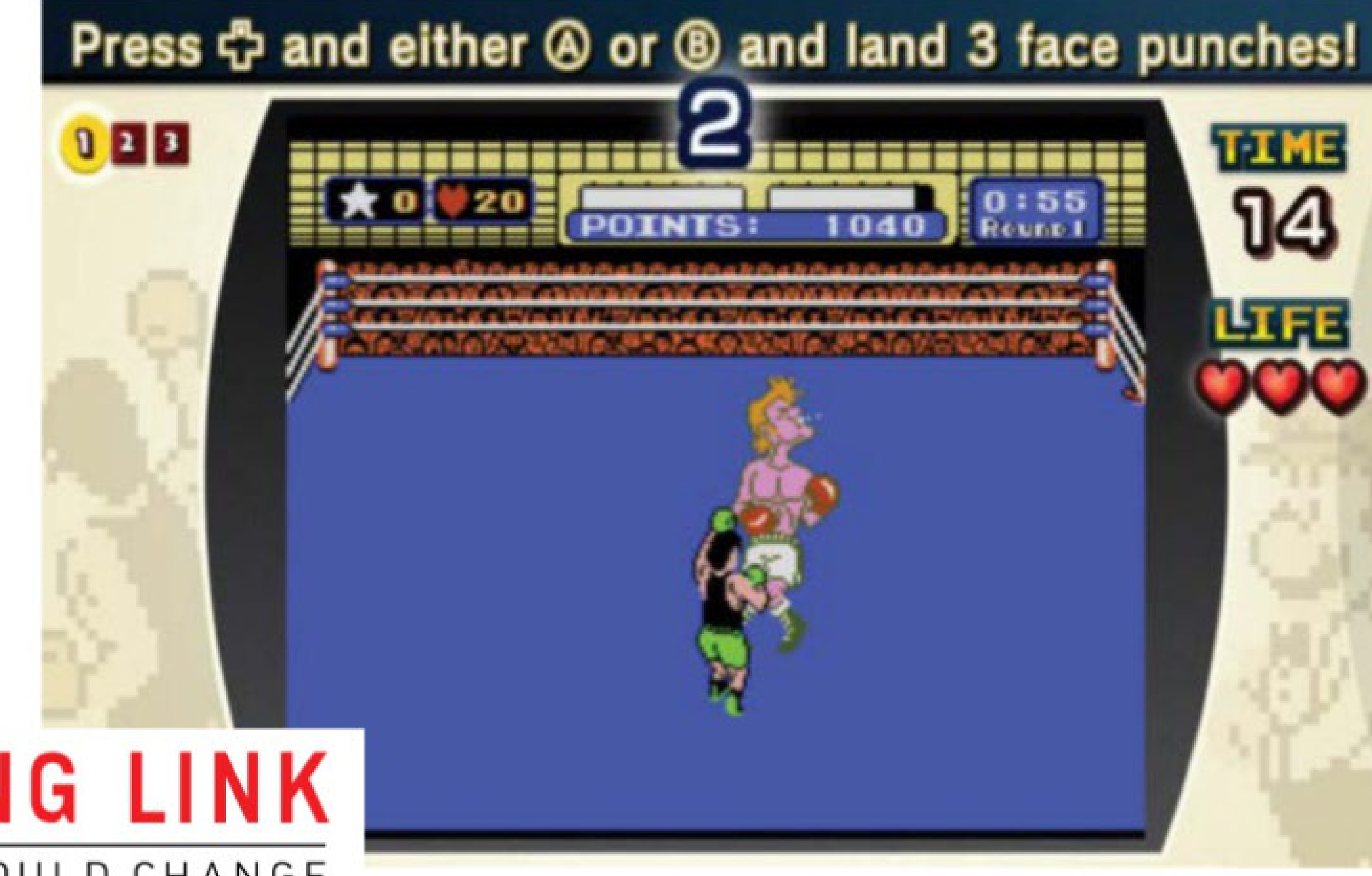
Structurally, the game is identical. Completing challenges in NES games rewards stars, which unlock further challenges. The most interesting of these are the Remix challenges, which fundamentally alter the original games in a number of ways, from providing distracting clones to placing characters outside of their own games. These occasionally fail to distinguish themselves from the NES challenges – Kirby only feels very slightly out of place when placed in Mario's world – but at their best, the remixes are brilliantly inventive

The NES challenges are far more numerous though, and offer a curated tour of some of gaming's greatest moments, albeit a hurried one. The bite-sized challenges make it easy to dip into the game in brief sessions, and this is how *NES Remix 2* is best enjoyed – the NES challenges can become rather repetitive during prolonged sessions, especially as half of the games on offer are platform games. Unsurprisingly given the quick turnaround, improvements over *NES Remix* are slight. The main addition is the ability to post video replays of challenges to Miiverse. It's a welcome inclusion which allows some of the community spirit of the NES era to shine through. Beyond that, the game includes a more substantial remix. *Super Luigi Bros* turns the familiarity of *Super Mario Bros* on its head by mirroring the level layouts and using *Luigi's* slightly altered physics. It's a mildly amusing distraction, particularly for those who have committed every leap to muscle memory, but not a whole lot more.

NES Remix 2 narrowly surpasses its predecessor, relying mostly on a better and more focused selection of NES software to do so – the structural improvements are negligible. It stands as another competent collection of mini-games which, while never equalling the invention or pace of the *WarioWare* series, provides a worthwhile reinterpretation of Nintendo's early highlights for nostalgics and neophytes alike.

BETTER THAN: NES REMIX
AS GOOD AS: WARIOWARE DIY

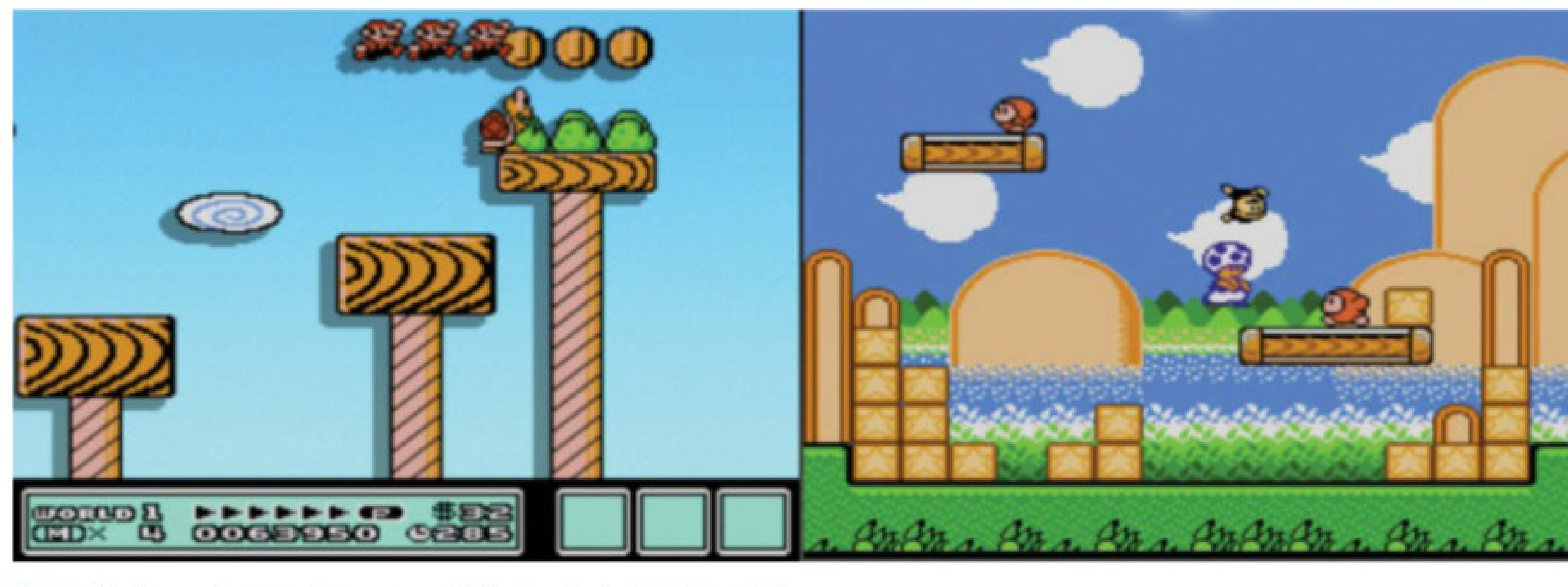
Above: Remixes which combine elements of multiple games are often amongst the game's most entertaining. Adding gigantic versions of Mario's Boos to a battle with Kirby's Whispy Woods is a highlight.



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

LEADERBOARDS These are actually included in *NES Remix 2*, but only for the Championship Mode, a nostalgic bonus mode for owners of both games. Why not implement them across every challenge?



Above: Like its predecessor, it supports off-TV play via the Wii U GamePad.



BETTER GAMES MAKE FOR A BETTER GAME OVERALL



Left: While the game helps if you find two parts of a special training card combination, it isn't always easy to figure out the final part. We would never have guessed that a spa treatment is key to learning super headers.

SIMPLE BUT INELEGANT

Nintendo Pocket Football Club

We're told that first impressions count, and *Nintendo Pocket Football Club* is certainly an enticing prospect at first glance. The combination of lightweight and accessible management with minimalist, stylised visuals certainly feels novel. Though *NPFC* is a sequel, the 3DS game is playing to a brand new audience as its Game Boy Advance predecessor Calciobit never left Japan.

When watching your diminutive team scurrying about the pitch, it's hard not to be amused by ParityBit's touches of flair – the sight of a losing team picking the ball out of the net and running it back to the centre circle after a late goal is as endearing as it is true to the sport. The cutesy animations even enhance the menu system, with players training in the background of the team camp menu. *NPFC*'s style of football management is also minimalist. Decision-making is focused on the game itself – players deal with tactics, transfers and training and these facets of the game are greatly simplified compared to genre peers.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: ParityBit
PRICE: £13.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2 (2 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

LET'S MAKE A SOCCER TEAM!





WORSE THAN

FOOTBALL MANAGER CLASSIC 2014

The consequence of limiting interaction is that individual decisions become more significant, with each needing to make a noticeable impact on team performance in order to convey the feeling of control.

Unfortunately, this is where the game's flaws become evident. *NPFC* makes a spectator of the player – matches can't be skipped or accelerated, and mid-match tactical changes can only be made at half time or with a substitution. Coupled with the AI's extreme interpretations of your desire for aggressive attacking or measured defence, it makes for a frustrating experience, as the game forces you to choose between persisting with a suboptimal strategy or wasting a substitution. This is exacerbated in online play, which enables asynchronous play by handing both players' in-game decisions to the AI, which acts within parameters provided by the player.

WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

EUROPA LEAGUE – Players are ranked within Europe and their home countries, but can't compete with Japanese players.
CUP RUN – Tournaments are on offer, extending the life of the game for the more committed player

Between matches, more freedom is granted. Training cards are awarded after matches based on the problems your team encountered during the match, and can be spent on individual players to boost their seven key statistics. They become more effective when used in combinations, but even when these combinations are discovered the pace of change is so slow as to feel inconsequential. It's a problem, given that this is the game's primary point of interaction. It's possible that you'll spend a couple of days celebrating your tiny team's achievements, but *NPFC* wants you to play for the long haul. While it only ever requires minimal interaction, by providing an equally minimal return it doesn't justify the time investment.



MORE MOYES THAN FERGUSON



Above: The game's visual charms are most evident in the match sequences. The graphical simplicity means that this is a game that you can happily play with the 3D switched off.

Below: Slaying enemies as you run through the momentum platforming levels causes them to explode in a flurry of weird patterns and colours. It looks spectacular, but at times it can all get a little confusing.





DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco Games
DEVELOPER: Crispy's Inc, Grasshopper Manufacture
PRICE: £37.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
SONIC HEROES



JUST LIKE
MIRROR'S EDGE

IT'S SONIC THE HEDGEHOG MEETS A 2D MIRROR'S EDGE

Short Peace: Ranko Tsukigime's Longest Day

When you boot up a game directed by Suda 51, you know what to expect. Well, you don't know what to expect, but that's the point, right? *Ranko Tsukigime's Longest Day* is as off-the-wall and bizarre as they come, featuring an eclectic and unlikely cast of characters, tied together by a wholly Japanese influence. Oddly, the game is released as part of a project – *Longest Day* itself only counting as one fifth of the overall package. There are four short movies constituting the bulk of the *Short Peace* project, and *Longest Day* rounds off the release as a much more light-hearted and 'comic-y' instalment.

As part of a package, *Longest Day* is a great experience linked with the animations that come before. As a game on its own, though, there is little value for money. The momentum platforming is fun, and the level variety will keep you on your toes for about three hours, but the game is rather shallow. You're tasked with escaping from various threats across horizontal planes, shooting enemies and navigating obstacles as you go. If you're hot on the timing of your jumps, you can hit secret areas… that don't seem to offer any tangible reward. It's all a bit vague, in terms of an actual gameplay experience, and there's very little challenge involved in completing the game.

The game mixes up its core formula with boss encounters (one sees you play vertically, as opposed to horizontally, and one sees you engage in a retro-styled battle against a masked luchador), but even these can't serve to fix the simple problem that this game doesn't offer enough by itself. *Short Peace* itself is a wonderful project, and we hope to see many more like it – the mixed media approach to content publishing is fascinating, and *Short Peace*'s focus on Japanese culture and heritage is a perfectly apt way to pioneer the strategy, but otherwise *Longest Day* itself falls a little flat.

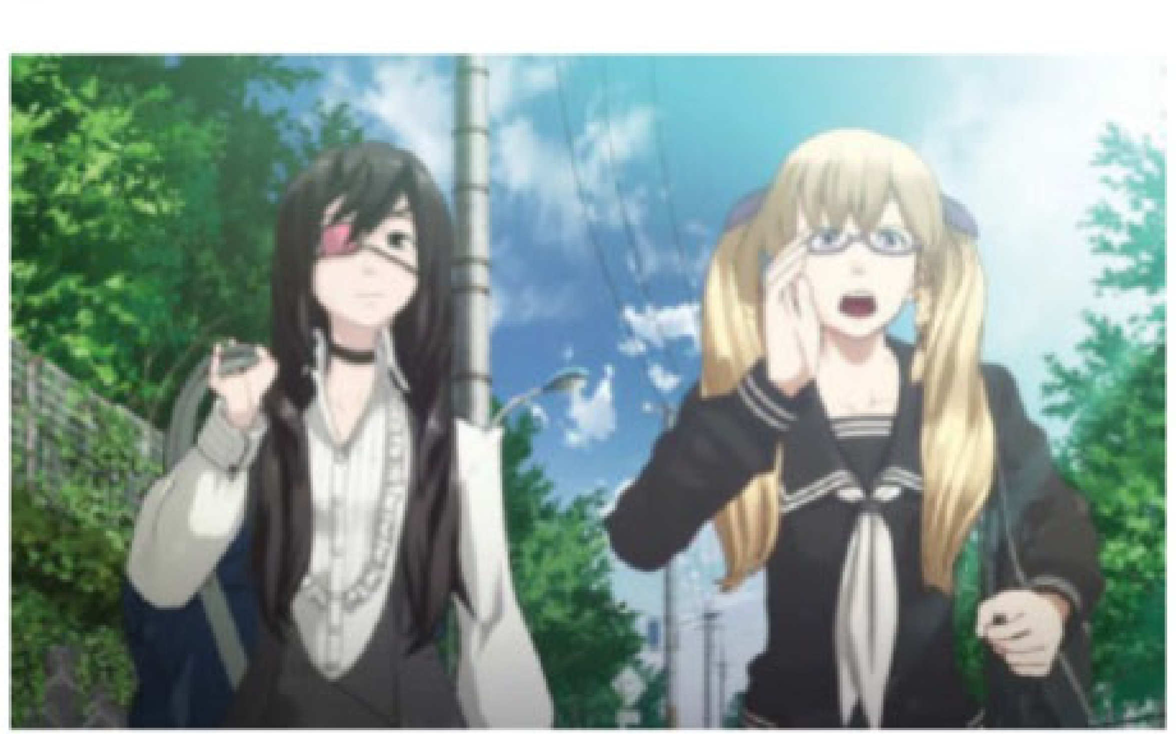
The animation and art direction of the entire *Short Peace* box is superb, and the production values the project has been keen to polish make it all some of the best anime we've seen recently (*Possessions* was even nominated for an Academy Award). *Longest Day* itself travels through a variety of art styles – some oddly Western – and you'll find yourself grinding through the levels just to watch the fluid (and typically Suda-directed) cutscenes. We're scoring the *Short Peace* collection as a whole – *Longest Day* was released as the final piece of the project, and if you spend the full £37.99 on the package, you're going to be getting far more than just the game.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ANIMATRIX The variety of animation styles through *Longest Day* kept our attention throughout the entire campaign – the manga-inspired panel-by-panel madness being our favourite.







VERDICT 7/10
A CROSS-MEDIA EXPERIENCE DONE RIGHT

IF LOOKS COULD KILL

Demon Gaze





Above: Once you've built up a decent enough party, you'll have little trouble dispatching foes. Until then, though, you've got a lot of grinding to do. But that's what this sort of game is all about, right?

On first impressions, *Demon Gaze* looks like a shallow excuse to dress a dating sim up as an RPG. Sink a few hours in, however, and you'll discover a fairly well-presented story, decent (though sparse) voice acting, and game mechanics that are far, far deeper than the shallow nature of the game's art would have you believe.

Think of the 3DS' *Etrian Odyssey*, but with fleshier art and generally more accessible gameplay, and you've got a good idea at the style *Demon Gaze* is going for. It's a refreshing RPG experience at the moment, too – in amidst the collective team-based titles or tactics-esque games, the first-person dungeon crawling offers a nice change of pace. The story revolves around a nameless, amnesiac protagonist who has the legendary power of the titular *Demon Gaze* – which can entrap rampant demons somewhere on your hero's body…

This allows you to recruit various boss demons you'll kill throughout the game, in a predictable level progression that sees you explore various locales throughout the world, in between coming back to a hub-world inn where a collection of diverse and decidedly sociopathic characters await to taunt you, beg for your help, flirt with you and, occasionally, threaten you with a few unsavoury acts (it's all quite mature, which stands against its childish presentation – something we actually found the game pulled off well, and endearingly so).

The characters you'll meet at the inn serve only to grant exposition and keep the comic relief afloat – the whole hub-world is a stopping point or you to recoup at before you head back into one of the grid-based dungeons (which, unfortunately, often repeat textures and come across as fairly bland). Navigating the levels and coming to terms with how to defeat each area's enemies keeps the game constantly challenging, and the wide selection of classes, weapons and upgrades available to you means no two playthroughs should come out the same.

There's a steep learning curve in place after the tutorials, so if you're not paying attention, you *will* get punished. But there lies the game's charm – it's unforgiving and you can tell it draws heavily from the first-person dungeon crawlers of Westwood or Atlus. The game doesn't bring anything new to the genre, but then if you're picking up this kind of game, you're doing it for the slight variations to the core formula, in which case, it won't disappoint. The story can become grating if you're just after the gameplay, and the earlier levels of the game can be repetitive until you power up a little, but otherwise it's a well-crafted RPG.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: NIS America
DEVELOPER: Kadokawa
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: DEVIL SUMMONER: SOUL HACKERS

AS GOOD AS: ETRIAN ODYSSEY

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

AUTO MOBILE The auto-travel option you can find in the map menu makes getting through dungeons a breeze. A well-implemented, necessary feature



MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Below: In typical RPG fashion, the demons you'll encounter are 'aesthetically pleasing' and totally not equipped for any kind of real battle… and that's before you take them to the bath house. Not a metaphor; you literally go to a bath house.





RETRO

NO.148



DISCUSS | Have your say on all things retro on our dedicated forum **www.gamestm.co.uk/forum**

THE RETRO GUIDE TO... PAC-MAN

He's over 30 years old, is one of gaming's biggest icons and arguably its first mascot. As his latest game and TV show hit the UK, we felt the time was perfect to revisit Pac-Man's vast and varied back catalogue

FEW VIDEOGAME CHARACTERS are as well known as Namco's Pac-Man. Like Mario and Sonic, he's escaped videogames to appear in all sorts of other media, from TV shows to songs, including a top-ten hit single, and is instantly recognisable to even non-gamers.

Created by Toru Iwatani and designed to be appealing to both male and female gamers, *Pac-Man* went on to become a massive success for Namco, although it did take a while for Japanese gamers to warm to him. He's now Namco's biggest licence, creating millions (mainly in merchandising) each year for the company, while still showing up in the odd innovative game that breaks beyond his original maze routes.

His latest TV show *Pac-Man And The Ghostly Adventures* has recently started airing in the UK, so we felt the time was right to go back through his entire back catalogue and reveal just how many games he's actually starred in.

PAC-MAN PLUS 1982

SYSTEM: ARCADE

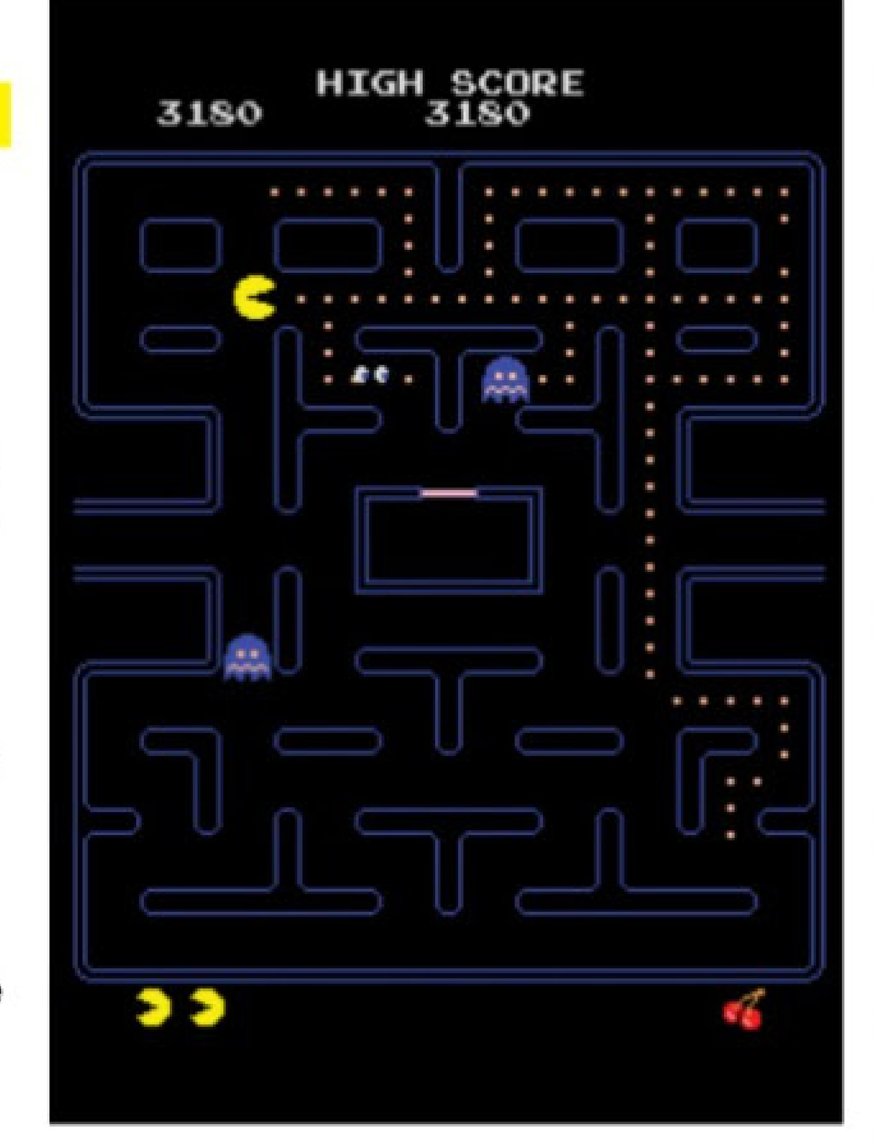
Another game created by Midway without Namco's permission. It's essentially the original *Pac-Man* but features more aggressive ghosts, random events (eating a power pellet might turn all but one ghost blue, or turn the maze invisible), and faster-paced gameplay. One for the *Pac-Man* hardcore as it's tough as proverbial old boots.



PAC-MAN 1980

SYSTEM: ARCADE

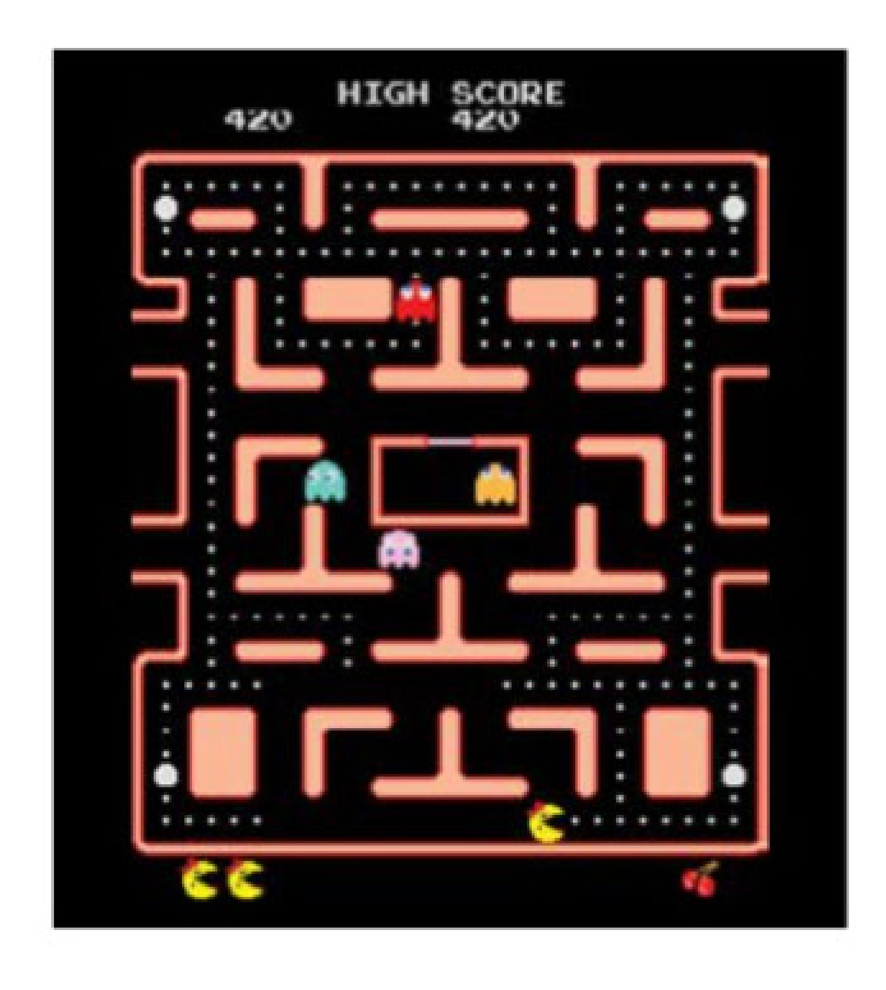
This is it, this is where it all began. *Pac-Man*'s story origins are well told, with even Scott Pilgrim using *Pac-Man* facts to try and ensnare the girl of his dreams. With his iconic look being partly inspired by a missing slice of pizza, and his rampant need to eat, Iwatani's creation felt like a breath of fresh air on release. Many arcade games at the time were clones of *Space Invaders* and other popular shoot-'em-ups, so Pac-Man's frantic rush around a maze, gobbling pills while he tried to avoid the intelligent ghosts, was a welcome respite.



MS. PAC-MAN 1981

SYSTEM: ARCADE

Ms. Pac-Man wasn't even created by Namco, instead starting off life as a kit for *Pac-Man* called *Crazy Otto*. General Computer Corporation showed its game to Midway (Namco's US distributor) who instantly commissioned it and changed its sprites to make them more *Pac-Man*-centric. It's easy to see why Midway supported the game – it would eventually lose the *Pac-Man* licence after creating numerous other *Pac-Man* games without Namco's consent – as it boasted a variety of additional levels and warp tunnels, making for a far more varied play experience. Like *Pac-Man*, it went on to receive numerous ports and helped inspire the *Pac-Man* family that would eventually appear in Hanna Barbara's cartoon series.





PROFESSOR PAC-MAN 1983

SYSTEM: ARCADE

Created to cash in on the popular quiz genre, this is a baffling entry to the series that features time-based puzzles you must answer as quickly as possible by selecting one of three possible answers. Some of the puzzles are quite clever, but it's instantly forgettable, which may explain why it got converted to Pac-Land machines a year after its release.

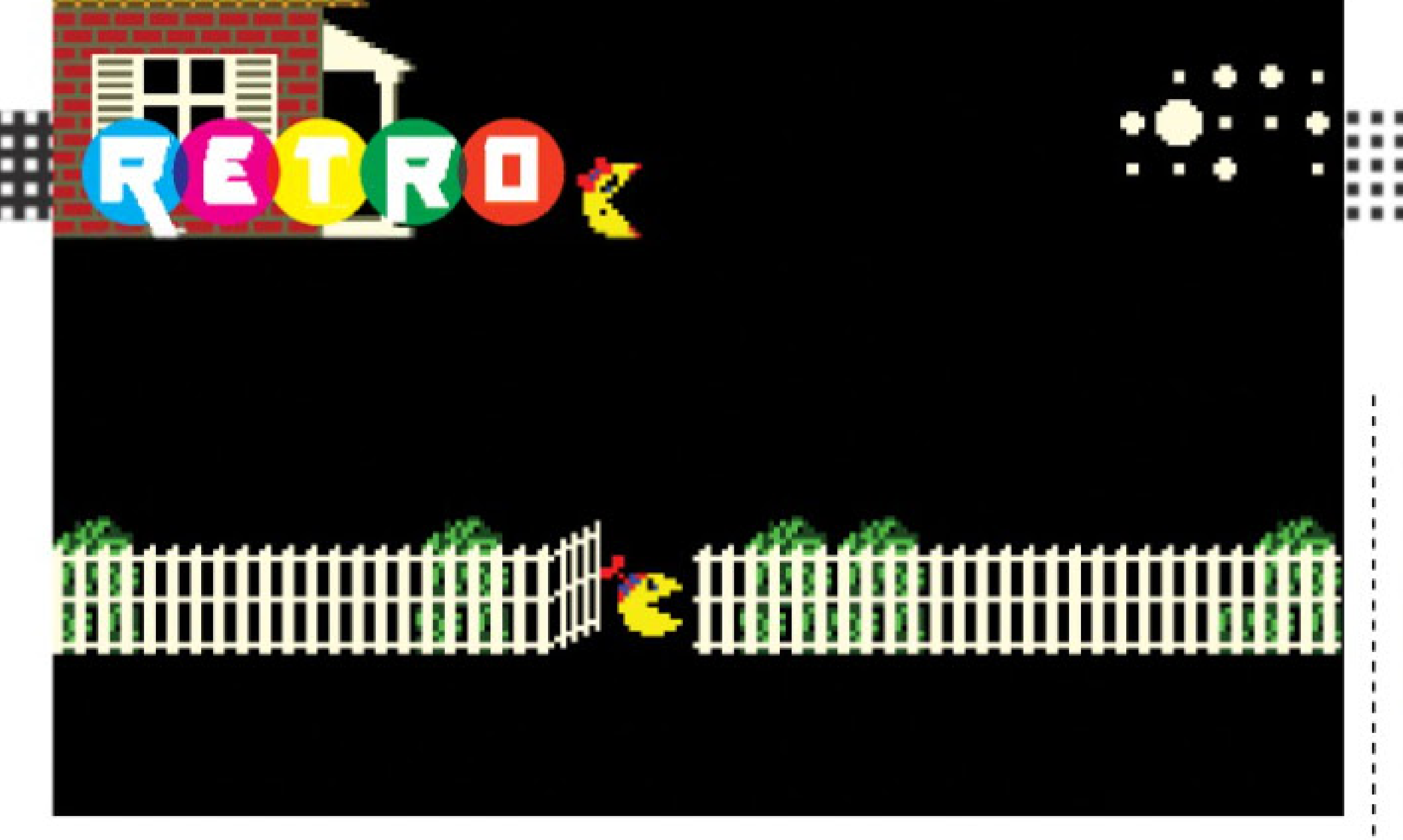


PAC & PAL 1983

SYSTEM: ARCADE

This interesting oddity never appeared outside of Japan. Pac-Man must eat cards, which will in turn unlock the items he needs to munch on to clear each level. The interesting addition here though is Miru, a ghost who would latch onto the items Pac-Man uncovers and return them to the ghost house. This in itself is a design mechanic, as she'll clear the level if she has the last needed item. It's again a little too fiddly for its own good, but has more depth than *Super Pac-Man*. An alternate version known as *Pac-Man & Chomp Chomp* featured Pac-Man's dog from the cartoon series instead of Miru.





JR. PAC-MAN 1983

SYSTEM: ARCADE

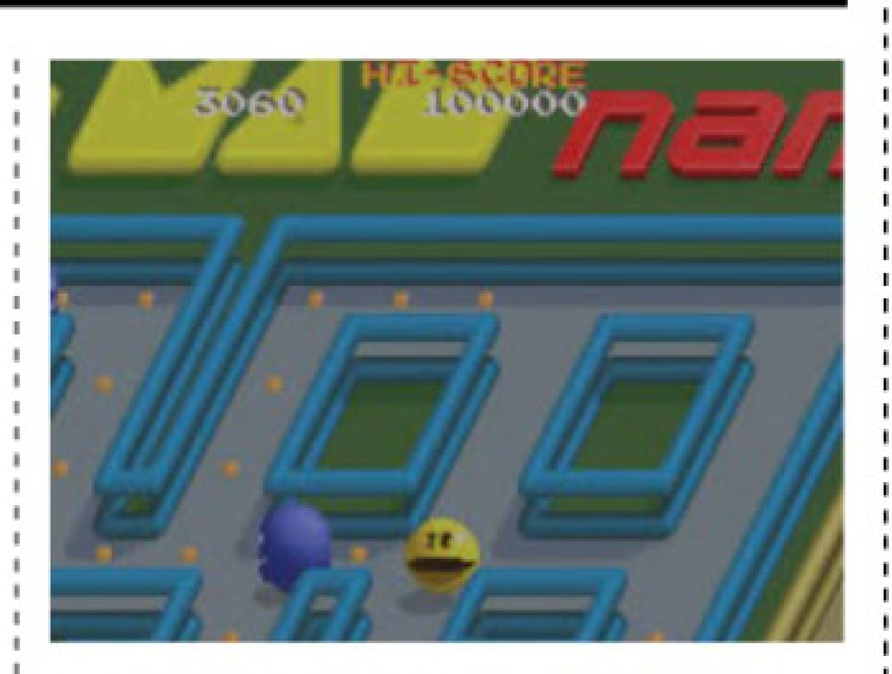
This was Midway's last *Pac-Man* game before Namco regained control of the franchise. It's a quirky one as well, with impressive cut scenes and a far larger maze, which required the screen to move to keep up with Jr. Pac-Man. Another interesting touch is the random objects that marched around the screen. Unlike previous games, they turn dots into bigger ones, which gave you more points but also slowed Jr. Pac-Man down. An interesting addition to the series that's certainly worth investigating.



PAC-LAND 1984

SYSTEM: ARCADE

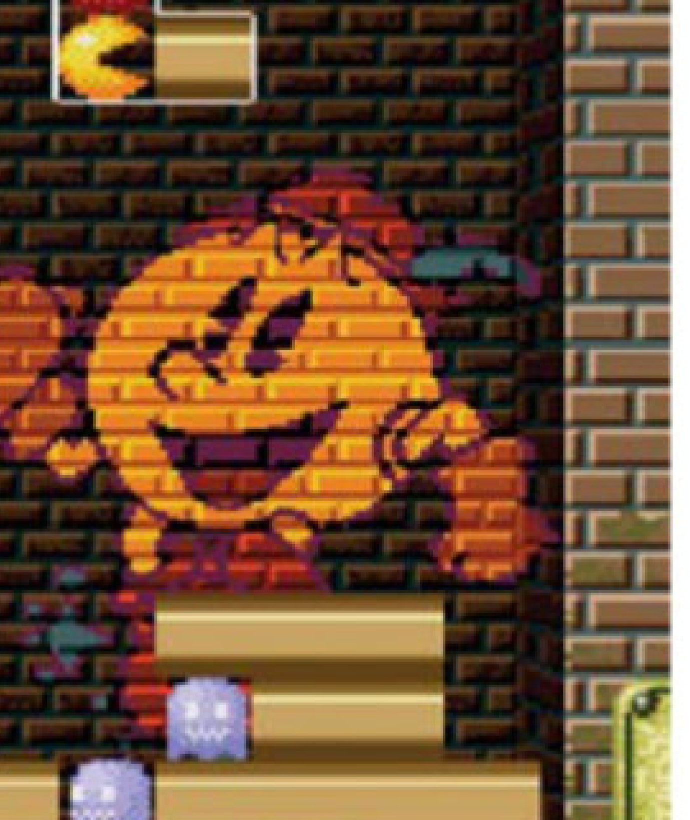
Another new twist on the *Pac-Man* formulae, this time by Namco. This is one of the earliest scrolling platformers, predating even *Super Mario Bros.* It's a good one as well, with Pac-Man running through Pac-Land and avoiding the ever-annoying presence of Blinky, Pinky, Inky and Clyde as they try to catch him using numerous contraptions. It's notable for using a three-button system to play and a tight time limit. Extremely popular, this version went on to receive numerous home ports.



PAC-MANIA 1987

SYSTEM: ARCADE

Pac-Mania was the biggest change yet for the popular franchise. It featured stunning isometric mazes spread across four different worlds, and two additional ghosts making for six in total. Luckily Pac-Man was blessed with the ability to jump, which made it a lot easier to navigate the tricky labyrinths. There are also random power-ups that can do things like increase Pac-Man's speed, while the two new ghosts jump when Pac-Man jumps, which creates another interesting twist to the core mechanics.



PAC-ATTACK 1993

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Pac-Man's first original console game was a fantastic little puzzle game that was essentially a remixed version of the obscure coin-operated *Cosmo Gang The Puzzle*. In it, blocks and ghosts fall down into the well and the player must then use Pac-Man to clear the ghosts and create full rows of blocks (which will then disappear Tetris-style). It's a highly addictive puzzler that also features an excellent versus mode, as well as a puzzle mode with 100 clever puzzles to solve.

PAC-MAN 2: THE NEW ADVENTURES 1994

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE, SNES

Another unusual departure for *Pac-Man*, but not a good one. It's a slow-paced quasi-adventure in which you must travel around Pac-Land solving various Pac-In-Time fetch quests. You have no direct control over Pac-Man and must use a catapult to affect him. The expressions Pac-Man pulls off are fantastic, but the slow pace kills it.



PAC-IN-TIME 1994

SYSTEM: SNES

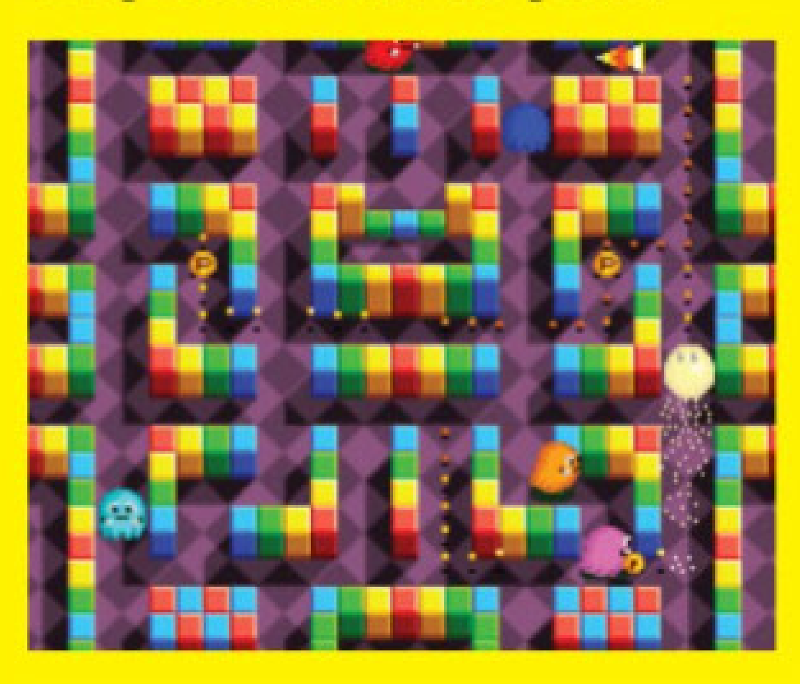
This is simply a rebranded version of *Fury Of The Furries* and was exclusive to the SNES. Despite this, it remains a highly entertaining game, featuring far more puzzle elements than previous games in the series. Pac-Man now traverses large areas in search of pellets and must typically unlock four different power-ups (that range from a hanging rope he can swing on to the ability to breathe fire) to complete his quest. It's a fun game that should have reached a much larger audience.



PAC-MAN ARRANGEMENT 1996

SYSTEM: ARCADE

Pac-Man's first arcade game in nine years was a huge improvement over the basic *Pac-Man* formulae. There's a new ghost by the name of Kinky, who can combine with the others to create unique new forms that really change the way you approach their transformations. New Dash arrows either speed Pac-Man up (letting him stun ghosts) or slow him down, while Warp Gates quickly transport him across the maze. It plays at a nice pace and features gorgeous presentation. Easily one of the best *Pac-Man* games and one that has turned up on numerous compilations over the years.



PAC-MAN WORLD 1999 (2004 GBA)

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION, GBA

Pac-Man World isn't going to win any originality, as it's a pretty basic 3D platformer that will mainly appeal to youngsters. Having said that, there's a lot here that's new to Pac-Man as he celebrates his 20th anniversary. He can swim, bounce on enemies with his arse and even use a handy dash spin like Sonic. Alright, so he's shamelessly nicked his moves from his peers, but Namco has integrated them well into the *Pac-Man* universe, and he's surprisingly sprightly as a result. Not a classic by any means, but an entertaining game that spawned several sequels.





MS. PAC-MAN MAZE MADNESS 2000

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Ms. Pac-Man's second starring game is pretty decent, with a range of different game modes and some new additions to the standard *Pac-Man* formulae. You're still munching pellets, but there's now a huge game world to traverse requiring you to move blocks, blow up walls with dynamite, launch yourself off jump pads and seek out keys to reach the exit. It's complemented by some surprisingly fun multiplayer modes and the original *Ms. Pac-Man*. As with *Pac-Man World*, the GBA version is noticeably cut down.

PAC-MAN: ADVENTURES IN TIME 2000

SYSTEM: PC

Another fun addition to the series, if a little on the simple side. Play can switch between a forced perspective or top-down view and mazes often have elevated sections that add strategy.



PAC-MAN ALL-STARS 2002

SYSTEM: PC

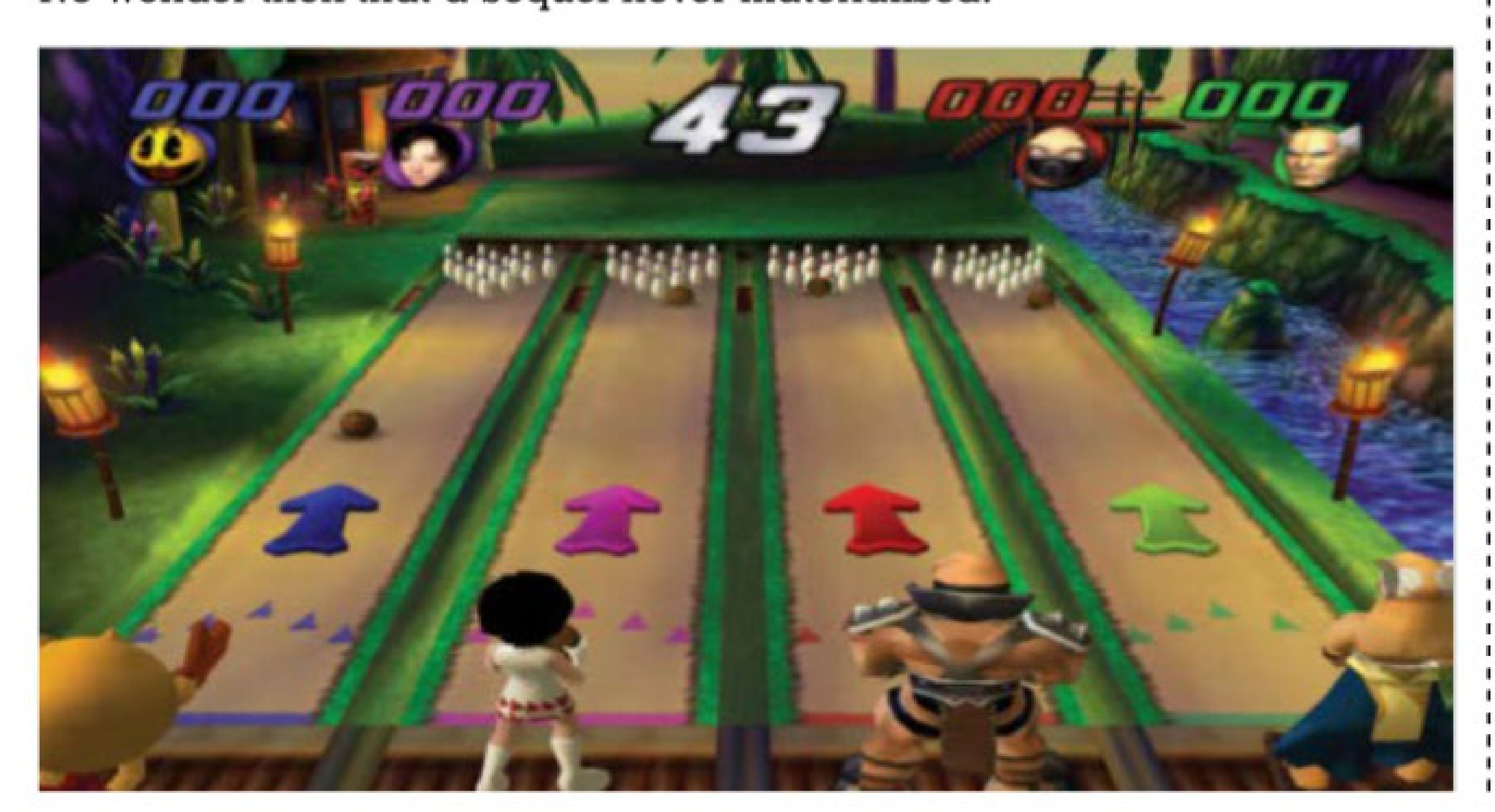
All-Stars was only released in the US; a good thing too, as it adds very little to the franchise, unless you're looking for dull multiplayer shenanigans. Thankfully, far better multiplayer games were to come...



PAC-MAN FEVER 2002

SYSTEM: GAMECUBE, PLAYSTATION 2

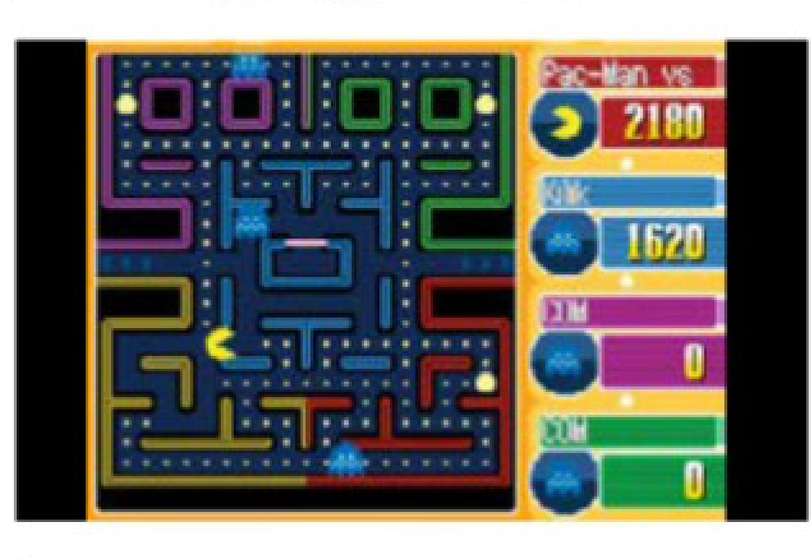
Pac-Man once again rips off his peers, this time creating an average clone of *Mario Party*. We love the super deformed Namco characters like Astaroth, Reiko Nagase and Heihachi Mishima, but we didn't like the bland mini-games lack of different boards to play on or the cheating AI. No wonder then that a sequel never materialised.



PAC-MAN VS. 2003

SYSTEM: GAMECUBE, DS

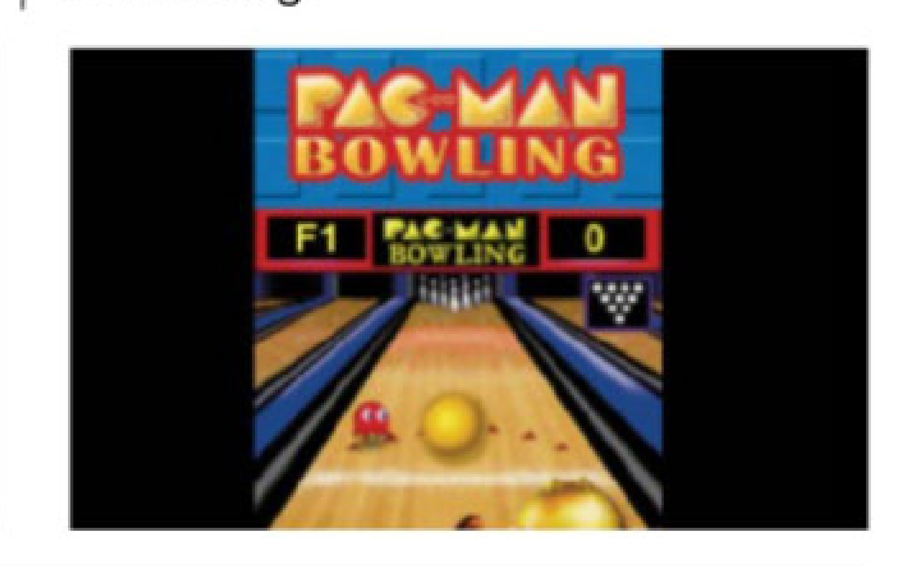
Created by none other than Shigeru Miyamoto, *Pac-Man Vs.* was a multiplayer game designed around the GBA's system link cable. The GBA player controls Pac-Man, while up to four other players control ghosts via the GameCube. It's a truly fantastic little game, foreshadowing the asymmetric gameplay that would eventually shape the Wii U.



PAC-MAN BOWLING 2004

SYSTEM: MOBILE

It's a bowling game, but amazingly, you don't get to throw Pac-Man down the alley. There are four playable characters, including Pac-Man and Inky, each with their own unique move. It's very well-suited to the fiddly controls of mobile phones and plays a surprisingly decent game of bowling.

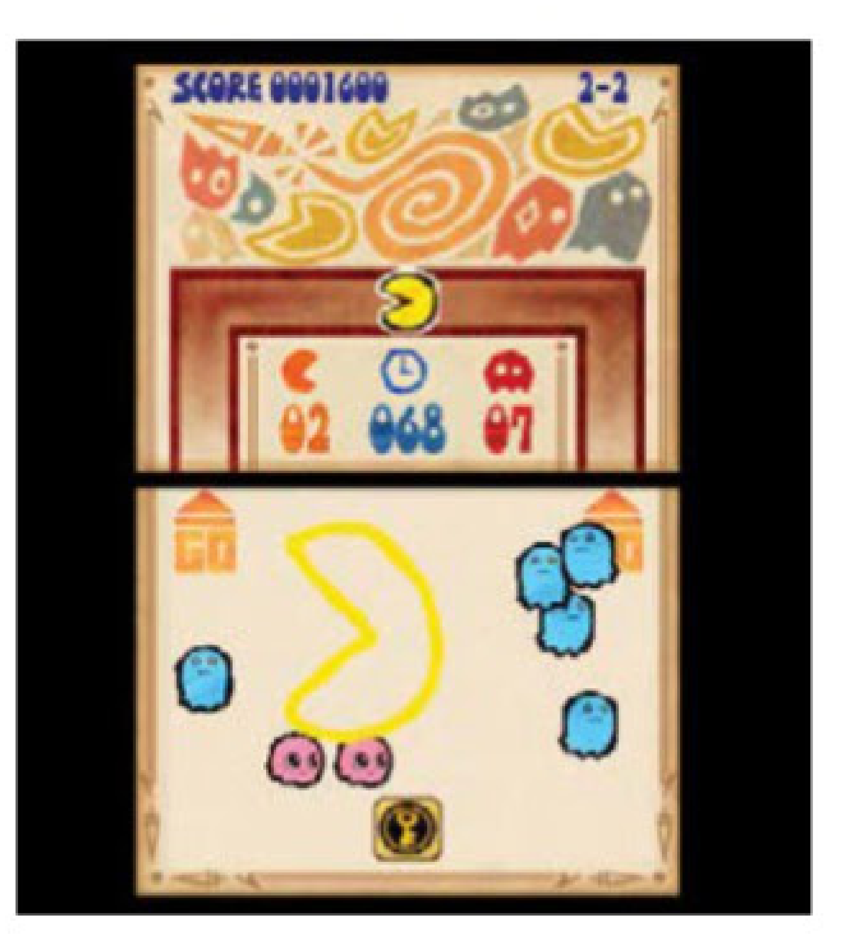


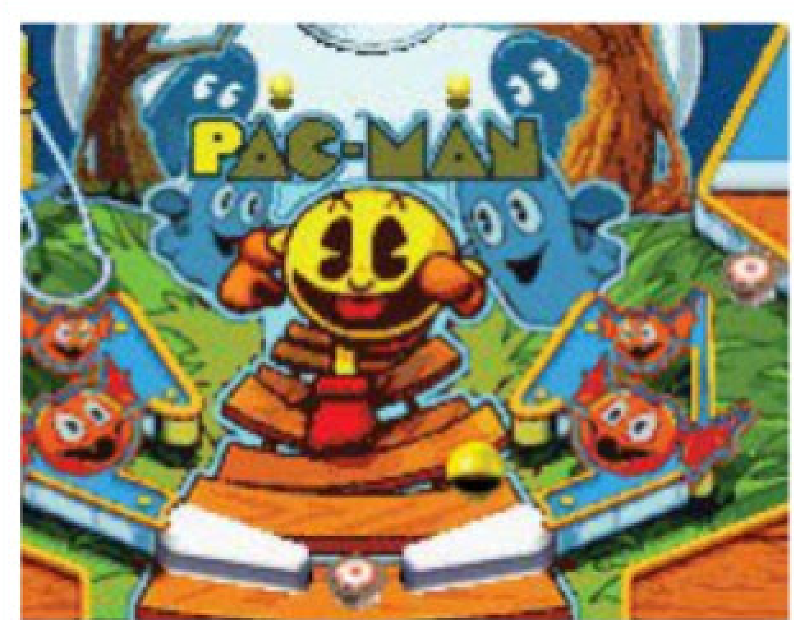
PAC-PIX 2005

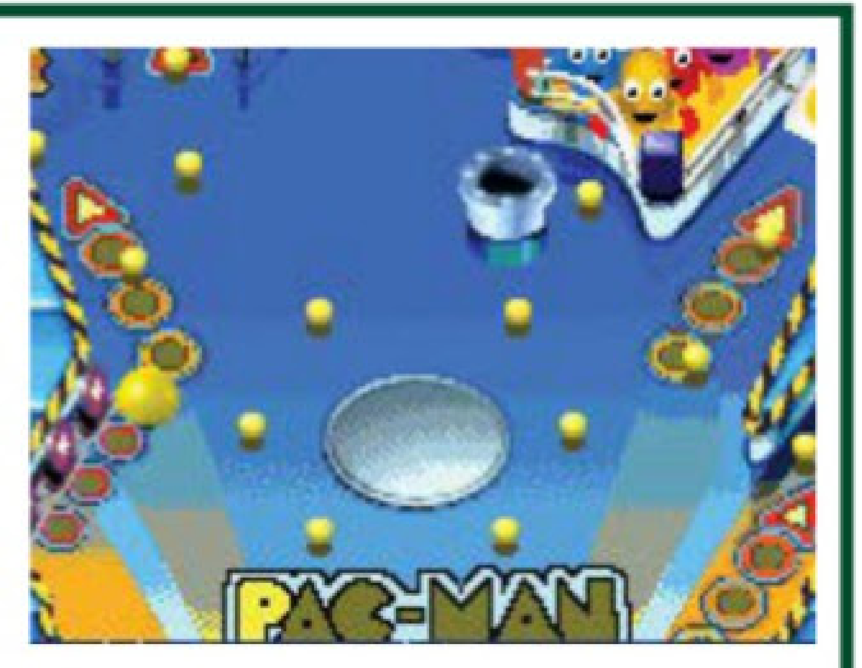
SYSTEM: DS

This was an early DS game that made great use of the stylus and touch screen. You're still eating ghosts, but this time you must draw Pac-Man and keep him on screen using walls, the stroke of which determines the direction Pac-Man moves in. You only have a certain amount of magic ink each turn, meaning the game does require a fair bit of thought to solve each puzzle.









PAC-MAN PINBALL ADVANCE 2005

SYSTEM: GBA

Pac-Man and pinball seem like a match made in heaven, so it's a shame that developer Human Soft fumbled it so badly. The core *Pac-Man* ideas are here, but they've been incorporated into two of the dullest-designed tables known to man. There's very little to do on them, while the physics make for some very unrealistic play. All in all, a wasted effort.

PAC 'N ROLL 2005

SYSTEM: DS

Another DS game and another one that tries out some interesting game mechanics with middling results. This time you use your stylus to roll Pac-Man around the well-designed courses, seeking out the pellets that will unlock the gate that lets you progress to the next stage. Okay, so it's effectively very similar to Atari's *Marble Madness*, but the stylus allows for a surprising amount of control over Pac-Man. As an added bonus, the story is genuinely entertaining, pitting our hero against a legendary ghost called Golvis who looks like a punk-rocker and carries an out-of-tune guitar with him..-



PAC-MAN WORLD RALLY 2006

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Namco waited 14 years to make a *Mario Kart* clone, but it needn't have bothered. Younger gamers will get some mild enjoyment from the cute-looking visuals, but that's plenty to dislike for everyone else looking to try their hand. Tracks are poorly designed, the power-ups are unexciting, while the collision detection feels very ropey. Additional Namco characters get dragged in for the ride and were probably wondering what they did wrong to be punished so.





PAC-MAN WORLD 3 2005

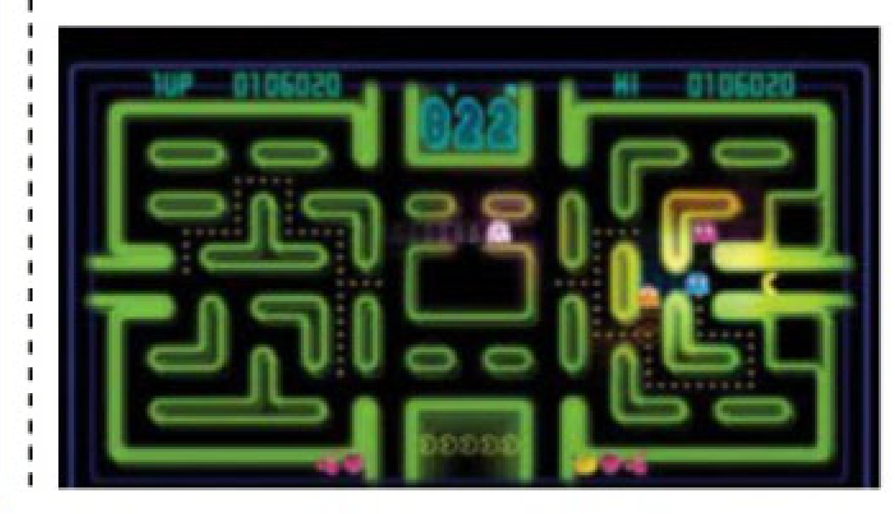
SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Created to mark *Pac-Man*'s 25th anniversary, *Pac-Man World 3* is unusual in that it wasn't released in Japan. It's surprisingly controversial for a *Pac-Man* game too, because the yellow tyke now speaks and is able to punch enemies in addition to his usual *Pac-Man World* skills (we can only imagine the outrage when he appeared in *Street Fighter X Tekken*). There's a lot more focus on combat than before and it gets repetitive pretty quickly, but there's enough charm and fun design in its levels to keep you playing. The original *Pac-Man* is also included, so you can see just how far Namco's mascot has come. Interestingly, the DS version is noticeably different and very, very buggy.









PAC-MAN CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION 2007

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Toru Iwatani returned to Namco to create what many consider to be the best game in *Pac-Man*'s gaming history. It's a deliciously fast take on the series, featuring far faster-paced gameplay than ever before and cleverly splitting the maze into two halves. Complete one side and an item will spawn on the other, and Pac-Man can then eat that to create the next maze layout. It's a beautifully designed game tailored around high score chasing. There are six modes, but it's the five-minute Championship mode that proves to be the biggest time sink. A sequel added many neat touches, but the original remains our favourite by far.

THE MINI-MAKING OF PAC-MAN



Where did the concept of *Pac-Man* originate?

"In the late Seventies, videogame arcades, which in Japan we call 'game centres', were just playgrounds for boys, and the only videogames on offer were brutal affairs involving the killing of aliens. My aim was to come up with a game that had an endearing charm, was easy to play, involved lots of light-hearted fun, and that women and couples could enjoy."

Is it true Pac-Man's design was based on a pizza?

"With 'eat' established as the key word, a shape caught my eye. I had ordered a round pizza, and it was missing a piece. The shape of what is now Pac-Man flashed through my mind."

Tell us about the ghost's personalities.

"The adversarial TV cartoon *Tom And Jerry* helped shape the relationship between Pac-Man and the ghosts. Had the programming been such that the four ghosts constantly attacked Pac-Man's present location according to the same algorithm, the ghosts would look like a string of beads. Where's the thrill in that? So I introduced AI-type algorithms that had the ghosts coming at Pac-Man from all directions."

Where did the concept of the power pellet originate?

"The inspiration for the power pellet was the spinach in the TV cartoon *Popeye*. The power pellets didn't exist in the planning stages at all – they emerged during the development stage as a feature for turning the game around, and made the game vastly more interesting."

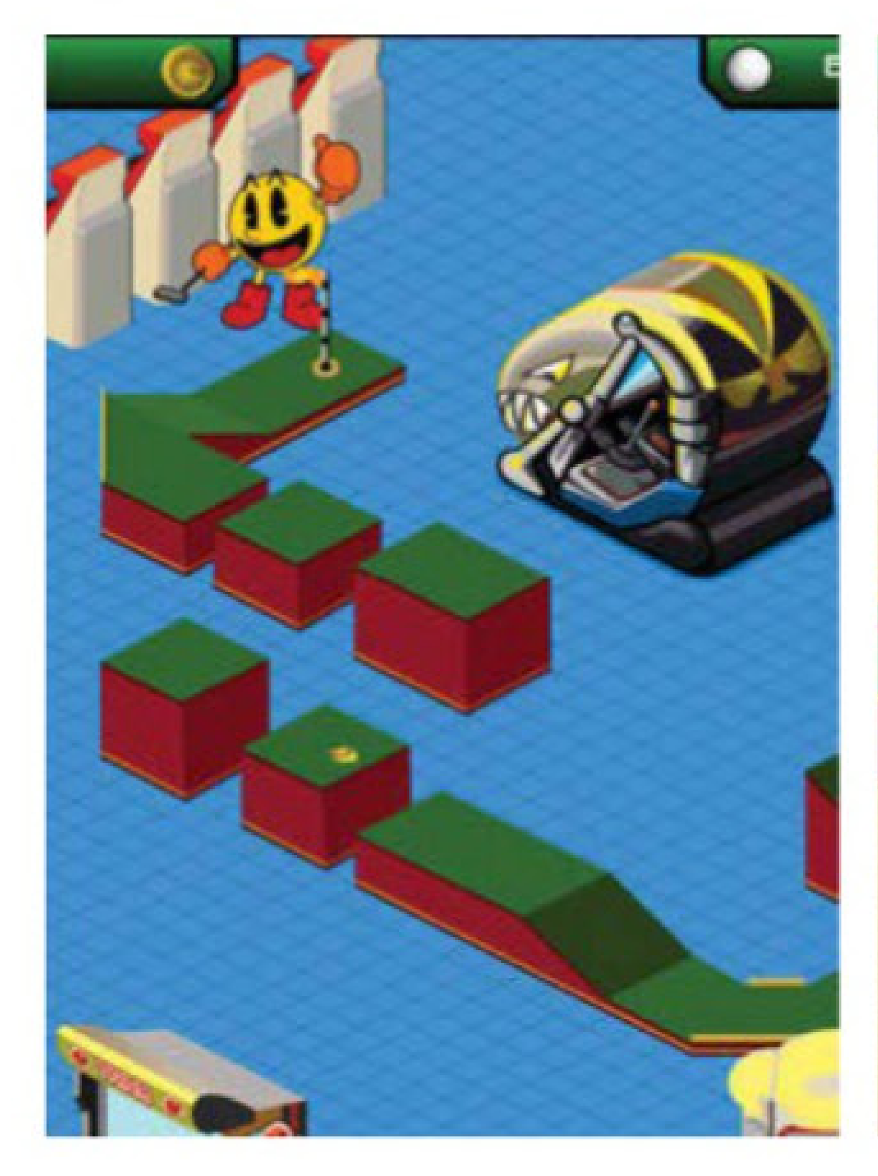
How does it feel being behind one of the industry's most famous games?

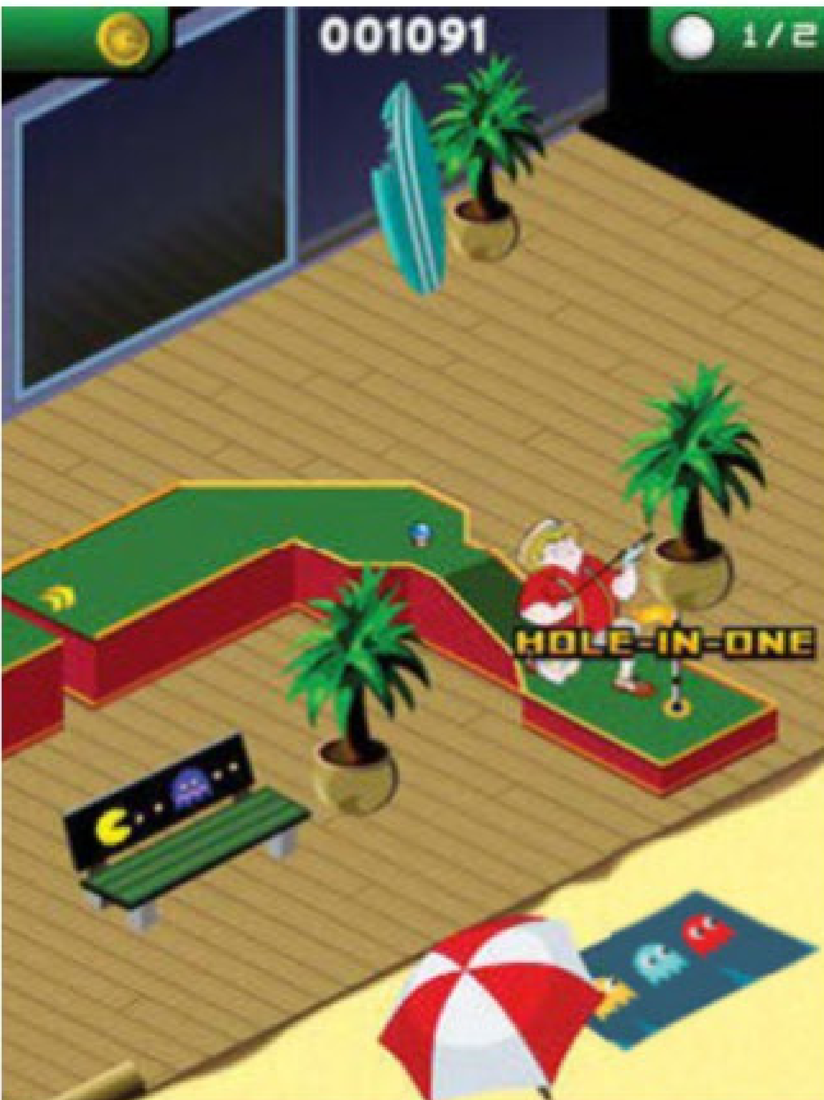
"People view the work in different ways, from different viewpoints. Some see it as being broad and shallow. For others, it is narrow yet deep and praised. What is gratifying about this is that people find such different reasons for loving it."

PAC-MAN ARCADE GOLF 2008

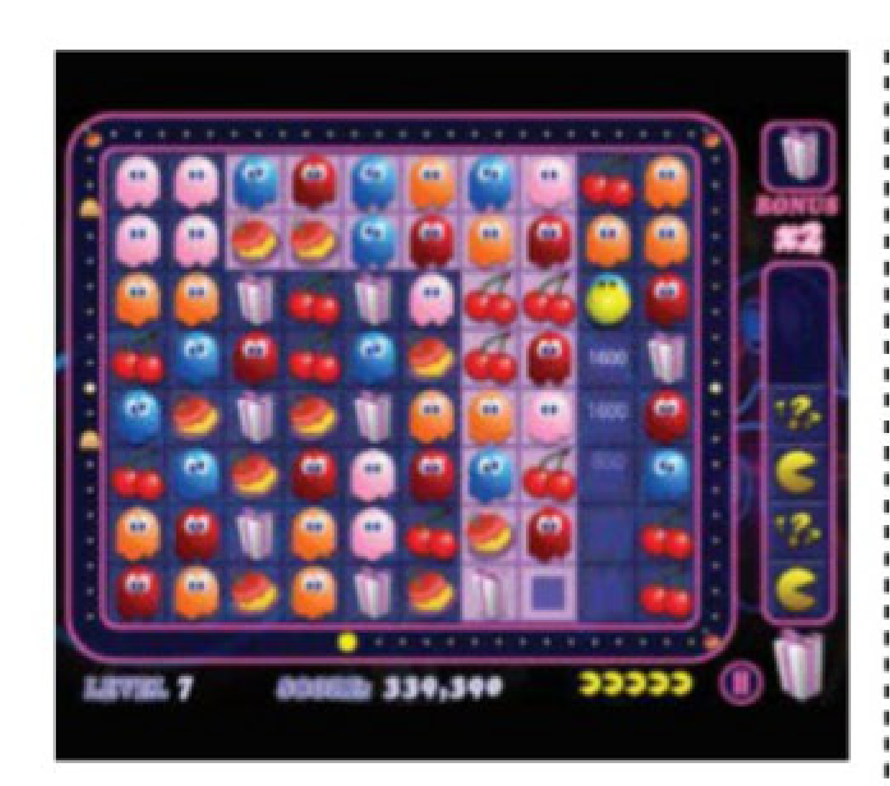
SYSTEM: MOBILE

The ball physics in this game are weak and the courses aren't the best designed, but the secret ingredient to this game's success is the large number of mini-games that activate when you hit an arcade machine. As well as being based on *Pac-Man*, there are also tributes to *Galaxian* and *Dig Dug*.





"THE TERM 'PAC-MAN DEFENCE' HAS BEEN USED TO DESCRIBE VARIOUS HOSTILE TAKEOVERS"



PAC-MATCH PARTY 2010

SYSTEM: IOS

In this iOS app, *Pac-Man* steals ideas from yet another popular genre, this time the *Match 3* game. The end result is an okay puzzler that sees you matching ghosts and fruit in a bid to score as many points as possible. You'll occasionally be able to drag power-ups onto the screen (including Pac-Man, who will follow a trail you create, gobbling anything in his way), but other than that it's pretty unexciting stuff. Despite this, it does succeed in being aesthetically pleasing.



PAC-MAN PARTY 2010

SYSTEM: WII, 3DS

Namco takes another stab at *Mario Party*. And again fails miserably. Asteroth and co have buggered off, leaving Pac-Man and his ghostly buddies to run around the poorly designed game boards and compete in a section of naff mini-games that range from rolling up spaghetti to jumping over items on a conveyor belt. Again, smaller gamers will enjoy it, but anyone else is going to find its repetitive mini-games and cumbersome controls too much hassle.

PAC-MAN: CULTURAL ICON EXTRAORDINAIRE

Pac-Man was such a huge success for Namco that he's spawned a huge sideline in merchandising for the Japanese publisher. There was a Hanna Barbara cartoon that ran from 1982-1983, and every possible piece of merchandising you could think of. T-Shirts, lunch boxes, backpacks, mugs, stress balls, clocks, energy drinks, sweets, belt buckles; if there's a way to flog him then Namco will find it.

He's been the subject of pinball tables, a fascinating documentary called *Chasing Ghosts*, and has numerous awards in the Guinness World Records. Buckner & Garcia's *Pac-Man Fever* reached number nine on the billboard charts in 1982 and has even caught the attention of parody master "Weird Al" Yankovic.

There have been numerous film and TV references, ranging from *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World* to *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Futurama*, while the term 'Pac-Man defence' has been used to describe various hostile takeovers. 34 years on and his popularity in today's culture shows no sign of diminishing, with *Pac-Man And The Ghostly Adventures* being the latest example of his popularity. He's most likely going to outlive us all.

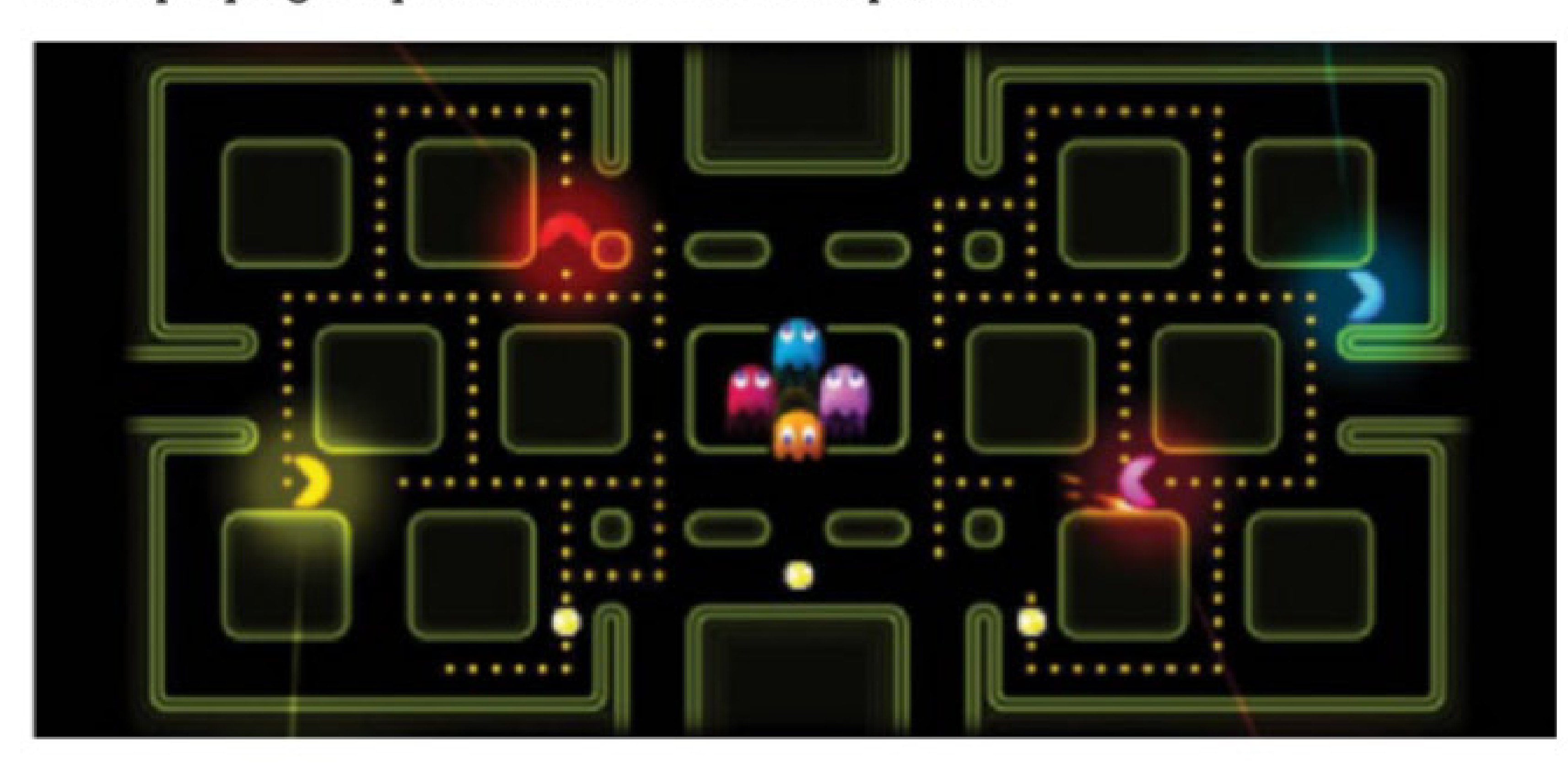


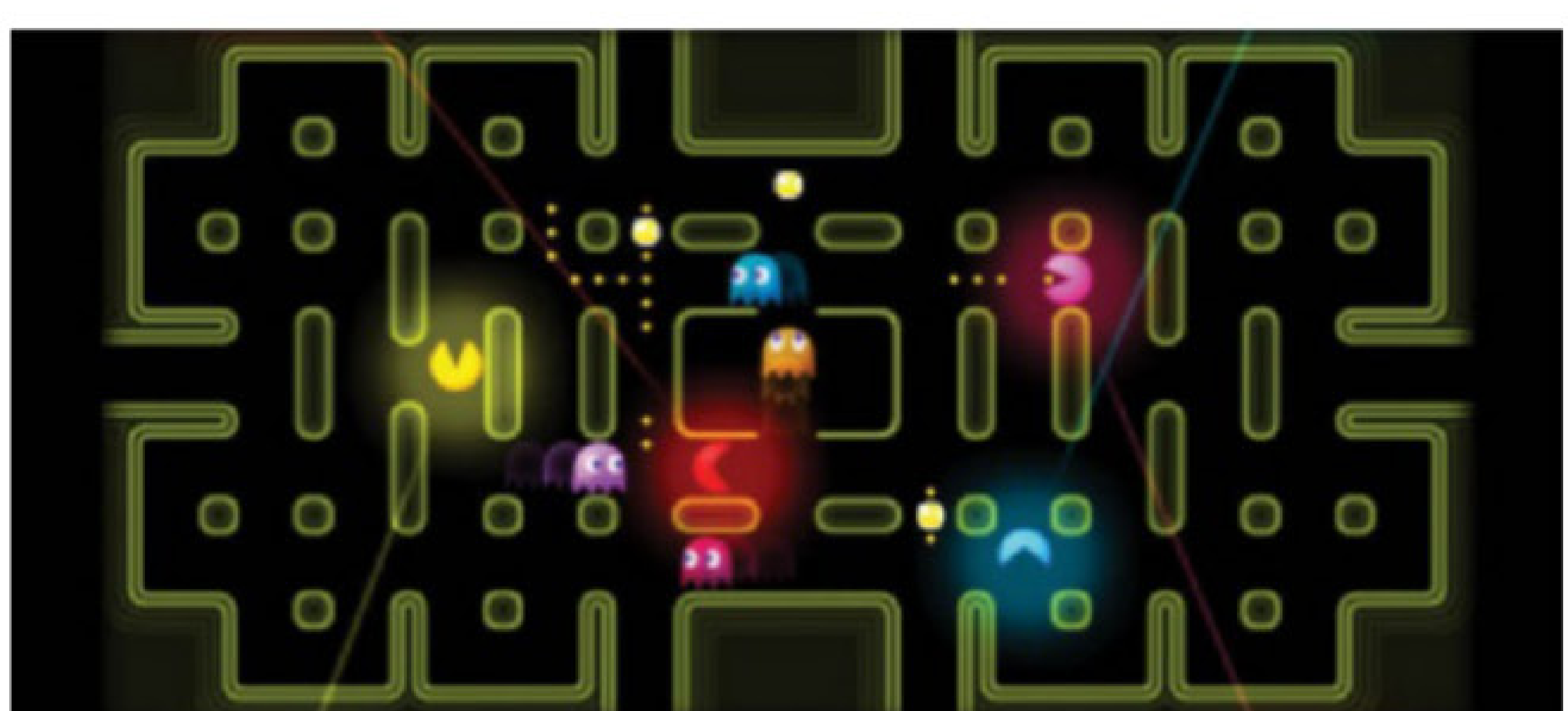


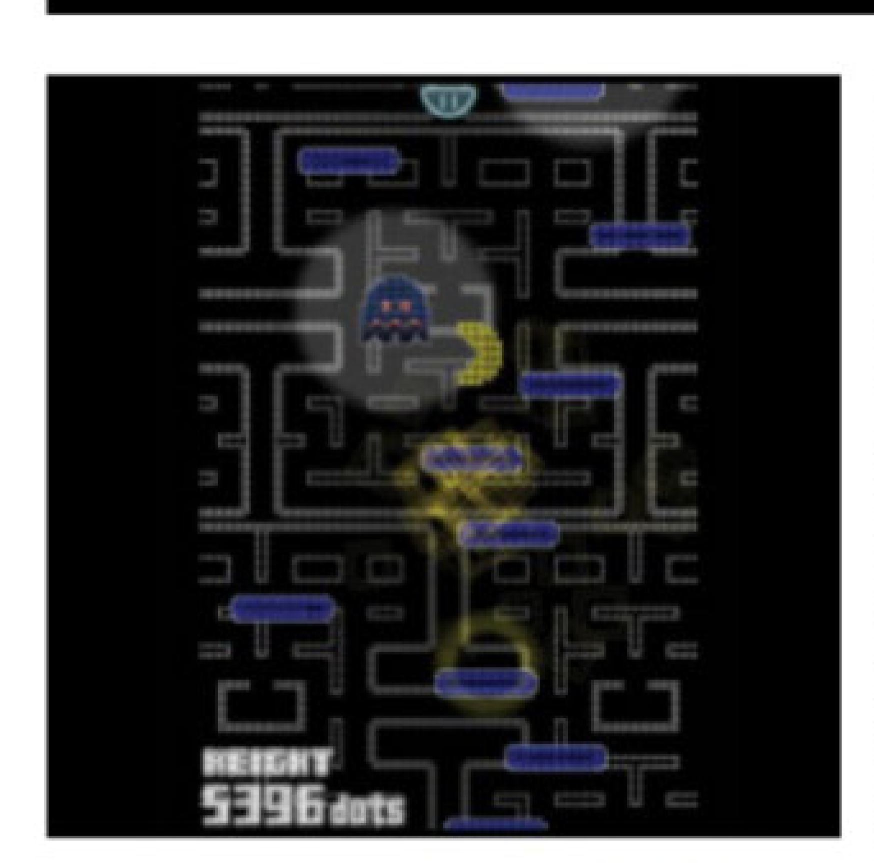
PAC-MAN BATTLE ROYALE 2011

SYSTEM: IOS, ANDROID

Designed to commemorate *Pac-Man*'s 30th anniversary, *Battle Royale* is another superb multiplayer game that proves there's plenty of fresh ideas in the *Pac-Man* formulae. First released in arcades and styled up to look like the Championship games, the focus here is on eliminating the three other Pac-Men. Eating pellets causes fruit to appear, and eating the fruit resets the pellet pattern. A nice touch is that there's always one less power pill than the number of players, meaning games are a frantic dash to get to them first. While it's great fun with other players, it suffers when playing on your own due to its simple AI.



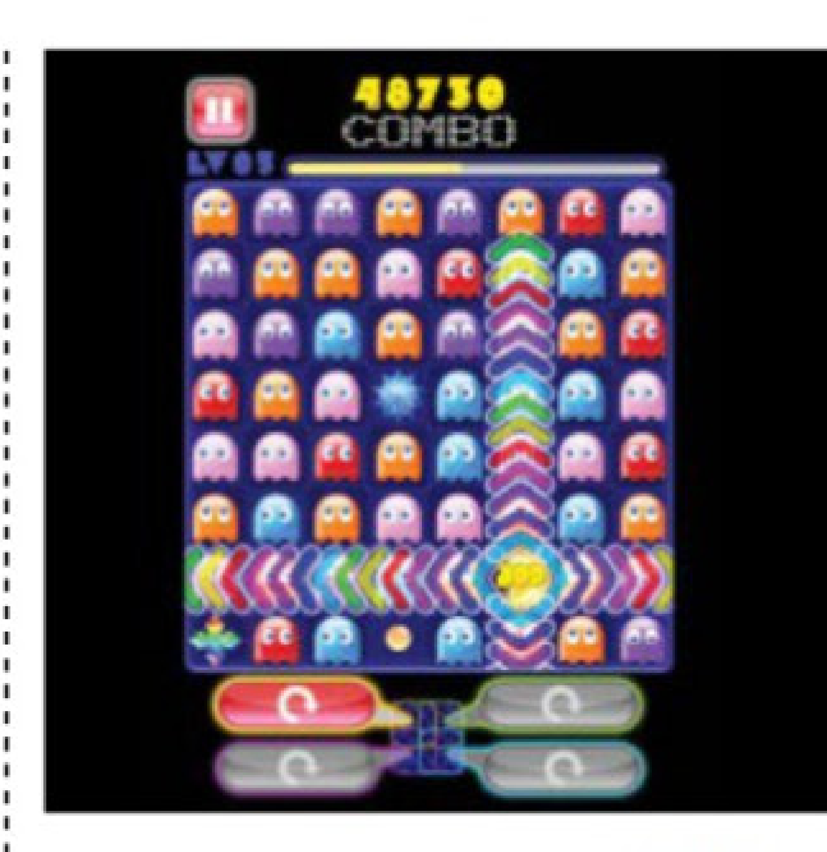




PAC 'N-JUMP 2011

SYSTEM: IOS, ANDROID

Don't be fooled into thinking this is just a clone of *Doodle Jump*. Well it is, but it does enough new stuff to make it feel distinctly different. It's absolutely crammed with references to Namco's past, often turning them into interesting game mechanics. Add in randomly generated levels, great physics and some delightfully retro visuals and *Pac 'N-Jump* becomes an essential download.



PAC-CHOMP! 2011

SYSTEM: IOS

Pac-Chomp is another *Match 3* game, but this time the screen is split into four sections and each section can be rotated individually. While the core gameplay is fun and there's some inventive power-ups (from fans to the traditional Power Pill), the games go on for far too long and soon become boring in anything other than Scramble, which offers a set time limit in which to complete it.

AND THE REST...

Here's the rest of Pac-Man's gaming outings

- **BABY PAC-MAN** — **YEAR:** 1982 **SYSTEMS:** ARCADE
- **PAC-MAN VR** — **YEAR:** 1996 **SYSTEMS:** ARCADE
- **PAC-MAN: QUEST FOR THE GOLDEN MAZE** — **YEAR:** 2001 **SYSTEMS:** PC
- **PAC-MAN WORLD 2** — **YEAR:** 2002 **SYSTEMS:** VARIOUS
- **PAC-MAN CASINO CARD GAME PACK** — **YEAR:** 2003 **SYSTEMS:** MOBILE
- **PAC-MAN CASINO SLOTS PACK** — **YEAR:** 2003 **SYSTEMS:** MOBILE
- **PAC-MAN PINBALL** — **YEAR:** 2005 **SYSTEMS:** MOBILE
- **PAC-MAN PINBALL 2** — **YEAR:** 2008 **SYSTEMS:** MOBILE
- **PAC-MAN CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION DX** — **YEAR:** 2010 **SYSTEMS:** XBOX 360, PS3,PC
- **LETTER LABYRINTH** — **YEAR:** 2010 **SYSTEMS:** IOS, MOBILE
- **PAC-MAN PUZZLE** — **YEAR:** 2010 **SYSTEMS:** MOBILE
- **PAC-CHAIN** — **YEAR:** 2010 **SYSTEMS:** IOS
- **PAC-ATTACK** — **YEAR:** 2010 **SYSTEMS:** IOS
- **PAC-MAN KART RALLY** — **YEAR:** 2012 **SYSTEMS:** ANDROID, MOBILE
- **PAC-MAN + TOURNAMENTS** — **YEAR:** 2013 **SYSTEMS:** ANDROID
- **PAC-MAN MONSTERS** — **YEAR:** 2014 **SYSTEMS:** ANDROID



PAC-MAN DASH! 2013

SYSTEM: IOS, ANDROID

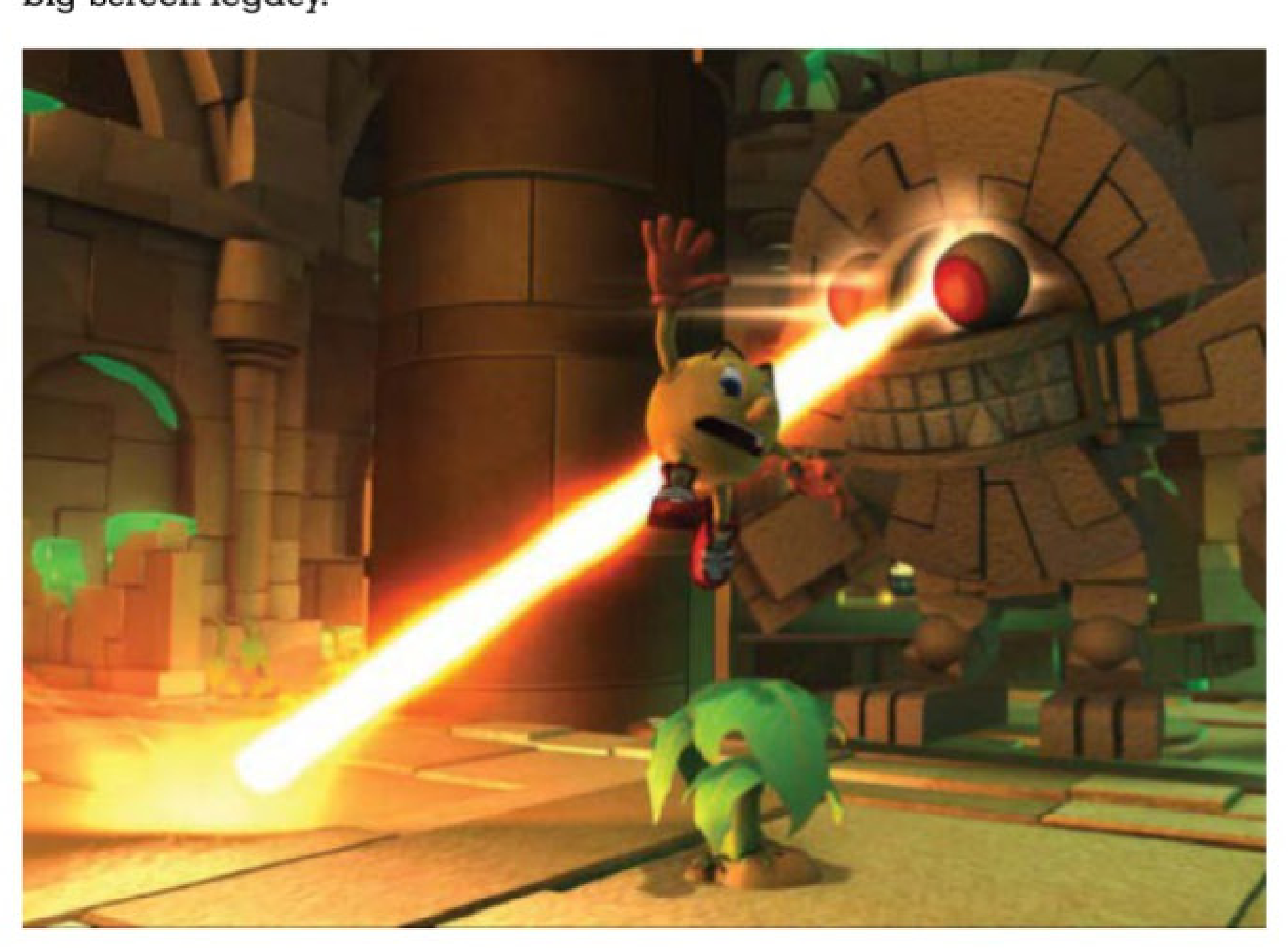
Pac-Man shows he's hip with the kids by appearing in an annoying free-to-play endless runner. The game itself is decent fun, with Pac-Man running around the varied levels trying to eat as many ghosts as possible. The timed play is extremely annoying, however, as you're often waiting around for quite a while before you can start to play again (unless of course you want to spend cash).



PAC-MAN AND THE GHOSTLY ADVENTURES 2013

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Pac-Man's latest retail release is based on the extremely popular cartoon. As a result the game is squarely aimed at younger gamers who won't have a problem with its easy difficulty level and by-the number platform mechanics. Older gamers may still want to investigate, however, because if you can get past the irritating voices, there's a large amount of *Pac-Man* tributes as well as a genuinely enjoyable multiplayer mode. It's not going to win any innovation awards and it's far too easy for its own good, but it remains a fun way to currently finishing off *Pac-Man*'s big-screen legacy.



PAC-MAN CLONES

Unsurprisingly, Pac-Man has spawned plenty of clones...



MOUSE TRAP 1981

SYSTEM: ARCADE

Clever clone that replaces ghosts with cats and Pac-Man with a mouse. Bones will turn you into a dog for a limited time and can be activated whenever you want. Very clever.



LADY BUG 1981

SYSTEM: ARCADE

Excellent clone by Universal which sees you in control of the titular ladybug that has to eat flowers while avoiding spawning insects. It's notable for gates that can temporarily block off enemies.



SNACK ATTACK 1982

SYSTEM: APPLE II

The main character may be a fish and the ghosts have been exchanged for Gumdrop Guards, but there's no mistaking *Snack Attack*'s arcade origins. Developed by Funtastic, a sequel was released later that year.



SNAPPER 1982

SYSTEM: BBC MICRO

Another clone from 1982, this time for the BBC Micro. Developed by Jonathan Griffiths and written in machine code, it's an extremely fast-paced variant that becomes tougher in later stages and had Pac-Man wearing a hat to avoid legal action from Namco.



FANTASY ZONE: THE MAZE 1987

SYSTEM: MASTER SYSTEM

This quirky game strayed away from its original shoot-'em-up gameplay to have all the action take place in various mazes.



FAST FOOD 1989

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

The 8-bit computer character Dizzy thought it would be fun to star in a *Pac-Man* clone. Boy was he mistaken... Painfully slow, dull maze layouts and puny power-ups.



BEST INTRO

METAL GEAR SOLID 2: SONS OF LIBERTY

PLAYSTATION 2 [KONAMI] **2001**

IF YOU'VE SEEN Marvel movie *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, you might have caught yourself suffering a little bit of déjà vu when watching the opening sequence – a bombastic setpiece that, while not entirely the same, illustrates how cinematic Snake's own return was in his sequel over a decade ago. Emerging from the shadows and stowing aboard a naval carrier, Snake sets about neutralising its entire crew against the backdrop of night, culminating in a rain-lashed knife fight with Olga. Kojima's love of Hollywood tropes created a barnstorming sequence of events that the series has yet to better, and while the ultimate twist was that Snake would be taking a backseat to a blonde whining protagonist in Raiden, the opening minutes proved he was still a hero to be reckoned with, even if we'd have to wait a while longer before he got his chance in the spotlight once again.





BEHIND THE SCENES

ROBOCOP VS THE TERMINATOR

Even the most ardent Sega fan would admit the Mega Drive console had its fair share of run and gunners and platfomers. A bestseller needed to be something special and have a great hook. How about a convergence of two of the greatest movies of the Eighties? Yep, that'll do…



Released: 1993/4
Format: Multi
Publisher: Virgin Interactive
Developer: In-house (Mega Drive) / Interplay (SNES)
Key Staff: John Botti, Tim Williams, Bob Stevenson Tommy Tallarico, Neil Young Noah Tool

AS WITH MOST great entrepreneurs, Sir Richard Branson had predicted the market before it fully arrived when he formed Virgin Games Ltd in 1981 and his foresight was rewarded with best-selling games such as *Dan Dare* and the *Now Games* series of compilations. The company slowly expanded until 1987 when Virgin purchased Mastertronic – although it's almost certain Branson was mostly interested in the rights the budget kings had recently acquired to distribute the Sega Master System in the UK and subsequently throughout Europe. Mastertronic had already opened a US office in 1986 with co-founder Martin Alper at the helm; he was to remain in charge as Mastertronic US became Virgin US and begun development.

With the Virgin Mastertronic budget line dying a slow death, strangled by the demise of the 8-bit computers and extreme competition, Sega began making aggressive moves to subsume its part of the Virgin Mastertronic operation; soon Virgin would be renamed Virgin Interactive as the Japanese giant inevitably took control of its own distribution. Yet development continued at Virgin US, and when it acquired the licence to create a game based around two iconic properties, a potential best-seller was born.

Loosely following the plot of the comics, *RoboCop Vs The Terminator* entwines the two eponymous cyborgs to create a titanic bloody battle. After its technology is utilised to help create Skynet, the chrome policeman is forced to battle terminators sent back to the past to cripple resistance efforts in the future; although why the terminators are trying to kill RoboCop and thus destroy their own existence is a bit odd yet perhaps apt as paradoxes seem to go hand-in-hand with time-travel movies. Over the ten levels, RoboCop takes in Detroit's Delta City, a toxic dump, OCP's headquarters and ultimately the future, having re-assembled himself with the aim of destroying Skynet itself. All in a day's work for the oversized tin man.

Lead programming and director duties on *RvT* were handled by 22-year old John Botti, an east coast Italian from Long Island, New York. Botti's story prior and post *RvT* could fill another ten pages of **games™**, but for now, we're concentrating on what he labels 'the most super-important game in my career'. "My dad was a math teacher and would bring computers home at the weekend and my brother and I play on them all weekend." he recalls of his first experience with videogames. "While my dad was athletic and had us all into sports, I turned into a total programmer nerd kid!"

By the time Botti left junior high he was programming regularly and already on his second business start-up. "I loved programming and designing games, but actually I was into business programming and that's what paid the big dollars – $25-$40 an hour for a kid in the late Eighties was pretty good."

After acquiring a place at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (or MIT as it is colloquially known), Botti relocated to Orange County where he

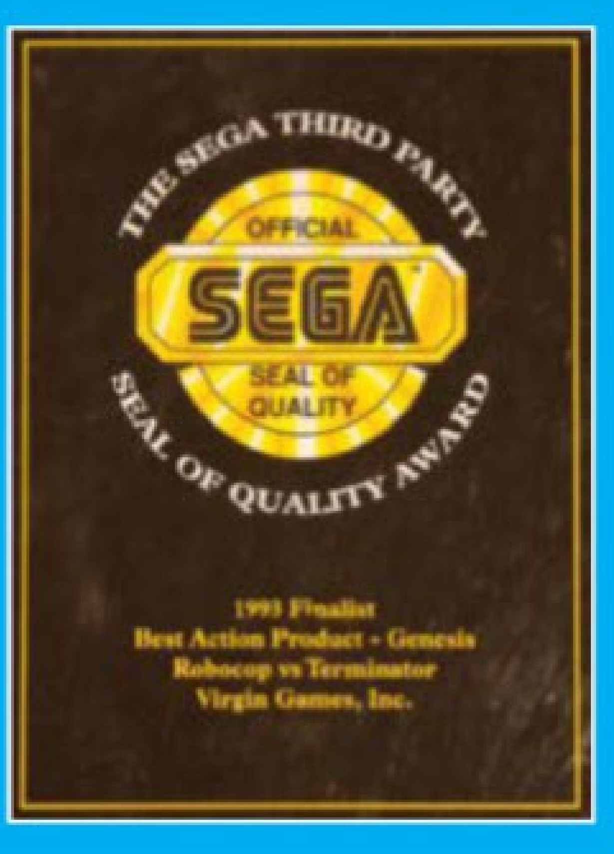

John Botti, lead programmer and director on *RvT*, says it was the most important game of his career.



IN THE KNOW

Facts you may not have known about the crossover title…

- The game was based loosely on the Dark Horse comic mini-series of the same name
- *RvT* was a finalist in Sega's 'Best Third Party Action Game' award of 1993
- John Botti went on to form Black Ops Entertainment producing games such as *Black Dawn*, *The World Is Not Enough* and *America's Ten Most Wanted*
- According to Tim Williams, the slightly absurd nature of the violence was noted in an opening monologue by Jay Leno on *The Tonight Show*.



began working at Virgin Games. His first task would be to wrestle with a licence the company had just acquired. "They brought me in after they'd got the licence for around two million dollars I think. There was no-one else on the project. I was it!" he laughs. The game was, of course, to be loosely based on the Dark Horse comic of the same name, although no direct content from the four-issue mini-series could actually be used. "To start with I was pretty much the guy," continues Botti, "and I took my PC home each weekend and worked every day. Back then there were no teams of programmers, it was just you as the coder and also the lead designer." Despite Botti tackling his first assignment with his customary gusto, help was soon needed; Virgin shortly added a handful of graphic artists and another key member: Tim Williams.

"After university I'd got a job at Virgin testing games," begins Williams, "and shortly afterwards I was moved into its design department. I worked on level design for games such as *Spot Goes To Hollywood* and *The Terminator* CD before moving onto *RoboCop vs The Terminator*." With high-profile licences such as *Aladdin* also in development at Virgin, Williams recalls an impression that *RvT* was the 'ugly stepchild' at the time. "But personally I was absolutely thrilled to get my own game to design for."

The structure of *RvT* would be based around Dave Perry's Mega Drive engine which had previously been used in games such as *Global Gladiators* and *Cool Spot*. Such a method was time-saving although Botti was keen to personalise the engine in line with his plans for *RvT*. "Dave's engine was clean and we often traded code. My main enhancement to it was making a linked-list sprite object that allowed the enemy bosses to be much bigger."

TIM WILLIAMS
Lead designer

Nevertheless, when Tim Williams joined the project, the game, while technically impressive, was a little bland in his opinion. "When I started, one of the biggest issues in the game was that it was just a bit average to play," he explains. "You'd walk, fire, walk, fire – and that was about it. One of the big factors that changed that was really just looking at the arcade games out there and learning from them, such as how the projectiles moved, what the speed and pacing was like, all little things that put together made a big difference." Perhaps somewhat controversially considering the metallic policeman's slow and cumbersome movement in the 1987 movie, this meant RoboCop became considerably more athletic in *RvT*; he now had a sharp turn and could duck and jump which made avoiding enemy weapon fire much easier. "I tried to create a design," continues Williams, "where if the player had truly amazing skill they would be able to get through a level without getting hit once. I always wanted the player to know that if they took a hit it was their own fault, and that with practice it could be avoided."

RvT took inspiration from arcade games.

RoboCop was more agile than in the 1987 movie.



WHAT THEY SAID...



This shoot-'em-up contains everything a good shooter should; a violent central character, a seemingly indestructible enemy and, of course, loads of huge weapons

Sega Force Mega, December 1993

All this freedom meant the capacity for even more mayhem and the team, mostly in their early-to-mid-twenties, were determined not to hold back on this aspect. "We all wanted there to be as much blood and gore as possible," laughs Botti, "and Tim and I even installed switches in the game so that when management came by the game wouldn't look as violent. It was all good hacker fun!" In addition to a *Mortal Kombat*-esque gush of crimson when RoboCop dispatched an enemy, little touches such as the blood-stained glass whenever the player shot a Terminator hiding behind a window were gleefully included.

"I pushed for things to be over-the-top which I felt would work well with the licence," adds Williams, "but it was also important to have weapons that really did do different things, and would be thankful to receive in certain areas. As to the blood – we put it in there without asking and felt a bit naughty including it – but around the time *Mortal Kombat* was coming out so we thought we'd add a slightly tongue-in-cheek version. After all, when you shoot someone in real life their head doesn't usually explode off their body! Actually, the over-the-top nature garnered more laughs than disgust, so we felt we were safe."

Together with much of the game design, the weapons in *RvT* were influenced by one of Botti and Williams's then-favourite games: Konami's *Contra III: Alien Wars*. "Tim and I would sit up all night analysing that game to try and figure out what made it so addictive. It turned out all to be based on the 'vectoral bullet' which introduces positional feedback into the game, so we incorporated this as *RvT*'s core mechanic." says Botti. Together with a dual weapon selection system (pick up a new weapon and it would replace the one you were currently not using), guns such as a powerful laser and the multi-directional flamethrower also added greatly to the game. The only downside was the marginalisation of RoboCop's famous pistol to a rather lowly and weedy status; trying to eliminate an end-of-level boss with just this gun soon became an endurance test rather than enjoyable.

Despite the fun the team were having making *RvT* as bloody as they dare, it was an intensive development as Williams, who was still studying in addition to working at Virgin, recalls: "I'd be splitting my time between university in the morning and then heading to Virgin after lunch and working until midnight, or sometimes even later. As the game progressed, this routine became more difficult as I had lots of essays to write; but I just loved this new world of video games I had discovered and was motivated by seeing the game get better each week that passed." The presence of 'superstar' programmer David Perry at Virgin helped alleviate the pressure as interest from executives focused on his games under development such as *The Jungle Book* and *Aladdin*. "There were all sorts of people popping their heads in my office during the day," says Botti, "but after six pm, everyone went home and it was just Tim, myself and, latterly, Noah Tool, a young designer working with Tim. It all happened at night, when there was just us sitting around and no distractions."

WE ALL WANTED THERE TO BE AS MUCH BLOOD AND GORE AS POSSIBLE

These late nights resulted in key input on *RvT*'s design from an unexpected quarter as Botti recalls: "Each night, at around eleven pm, the janitor would finish and stop by my office to see the latest cool things we'd put in the game. And one evening in particular I was showing him how when an enemy threw a Molotov cocktail at RoboCop he would catch fire!" The programmer, proud of his idea, failed to spot a potential problem: once on fire, how could the player put the flames out in an inventive and fun way rather than the fire simply disappearing? "This guy suggested that on the construction level you include sprinklers which could be shot out therefore

THE TERMINATOR AND ROBOCOP

■ GIVEN THE POTENTIAL material for videogame adaptation, it is no surprise both these franchises have appeared heavily on various computers and games consoles over the years. But while Ocean Software scored big with its official *RoboCop* game in 1988, it wasn't until 1992 that The Terminator would appear in pixelated form in your own home. In a predictable move, Virgin's game saw the player take on the role of Kyle Reese as he battled throughout time to defeat the nefarious Skynet. The same year saw Bethesda Softworks launch the first of its *Terminator* line with *The Terminator 2029* while 1993 marked the release of *The Terminator Sega CD*, an upgraded version of the Mega Drive cart that vastly improved the gameplay and boasted an incredible soundtrack to boot (courtesy once more of Tommy Tallarico). Meantime the chrome-plated cyborg received two further games courtesy of Ocean but has been curiously quieter with the only release of note being 2003's distinctly average FPS from MGM Interactive.







RoboCop vs The Terminator is every bit as silly and entertaining as the movies it's inspired by

Retro Gamer, Issue 99



Who will win in the final showdown?

raining down on RoboCop and putting the fire out. We also had fire hydrants on the first level so were able to create a really fun game-within-a-game where you were fighting enemies and bosses while trying to stop RoboCop melting!"

In spite of the long hours the team spent on *RvT*, there would inevitably be levels and gameplay that had to be left out. Something Botti remembers particularly fondly was a level where RoboCop takes to the air. "Nick Bruty, Dave Perry's lead artist, had created these hunter-killer ships and a main *RoboCop* ship and it played a lot like the classic arcade game *Defender*." Offering a nice variation to the constant running and gunning, the '*Defender*' level was about half-complete before Botti himself pulled the plug. "I was in Dave Perry's office one morning and he and Nick were playing this level. They loved it, as did I, but we all agreed there wasn't enough time on the schedule to complete it. Besides, the main part of the game had gotten very good and addictive and Bob Stevenson's art was really starting to shine. So right there, with no management present, we decided to drop it."

In August of 1992, Botti had first begun 'digging around Dave Perry's code' ; just over a year later the game was hitting the shelves along with the Super Nintendo version as ported by Interplay. "Martin Alper [Virgin CEO] and Brian Fargo were friends," says Botti, "and Interplay were literally across the street on the same industrial park in Irvine, California." Reviews for both versions were generally positive although critics were keen to highlight the game's relentless violence and steep difficulty curve. "I always felt the hit points on the bosses were way too high," remembers Williams, "and felt this would be frustrating for the player. This was a point of friendly contention between myself and John who wanted high hit points. And he won out on that occasion." In the days before dedicated play-testing staff, *RvT*'s difficulty level came from a familiar problem. "We were all playing the game non-stop and had become expert at it," says Botti, "so it was tuned to be really hard for us. A bad and typical mistake towards the end of the cycle."

RoboCop vs The Terminator represents perhaps the last of an era where the direction and design of



John Botti worked for the PlayStation market shortly after *RvT*'s release.

the game was solely in the hands of those creating it. "It was a magical time where the game programmer and designer types ran the team but were also accountable fully for the success or failure of the

THE OVER-THE-TOP NATURE GARNERED MORE LAUGHS THAN DISGUST, SO WE FELT WE WERE SAFE

game," remarks Botti. "If your game sucked it was your fault!" Fortunately, *RoboCop vs The Terminator* did not suck. In fact, it was actually rather good. "I remember showing the game to Richard Branson, who was in the area to open one of his megastores, and I'm not even sure he knew he had a gaming division!" laughs Williams. The Virgin boss, on the surface at least, appeared impressed. "All he kept saying was 'Amazing…amazing!', but to be honest I got the impression he didn't really know what he was looking at! Great guy, though."

So how do Botti and Williams look back today at *RvT*? "At the time it was just another project," muses Botti, "but actually it was my real start in the business and my launchpad to being free of ever having to have a real job again." Williams echoes this and smiles as we ask which version we think

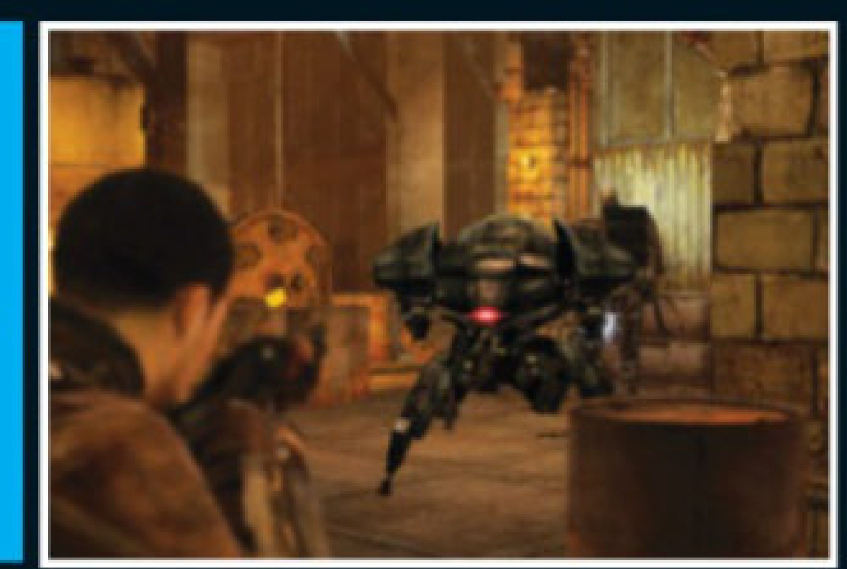
> A GAMING EVOLUTION RoboCop > RvT > Terminator: Salvation



RoboCop Ocean's game featured run and gun segments punctured with mini-games.



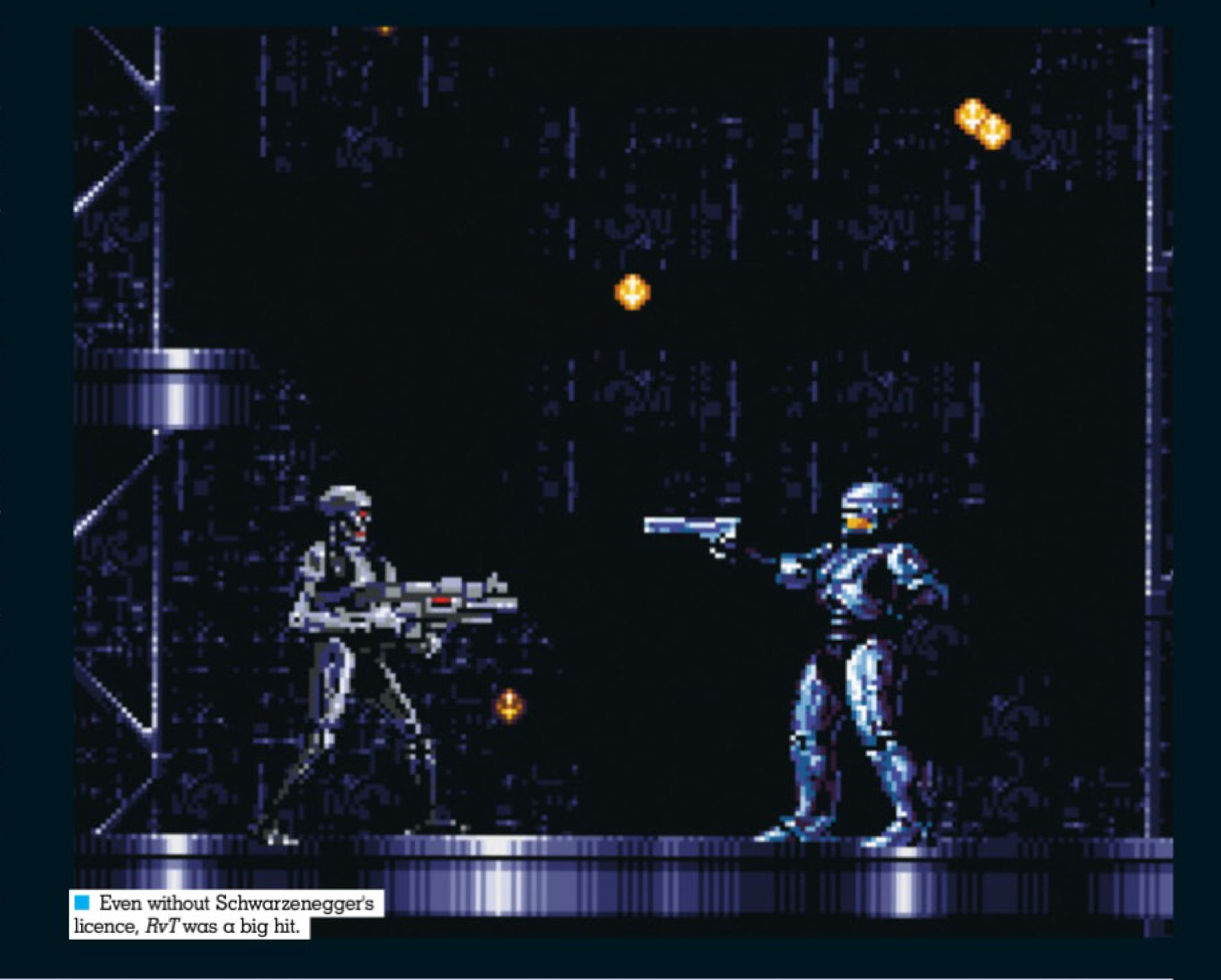
Terminator: Salvation Predictably, modern iterations of both franchises are now generally TPS games.



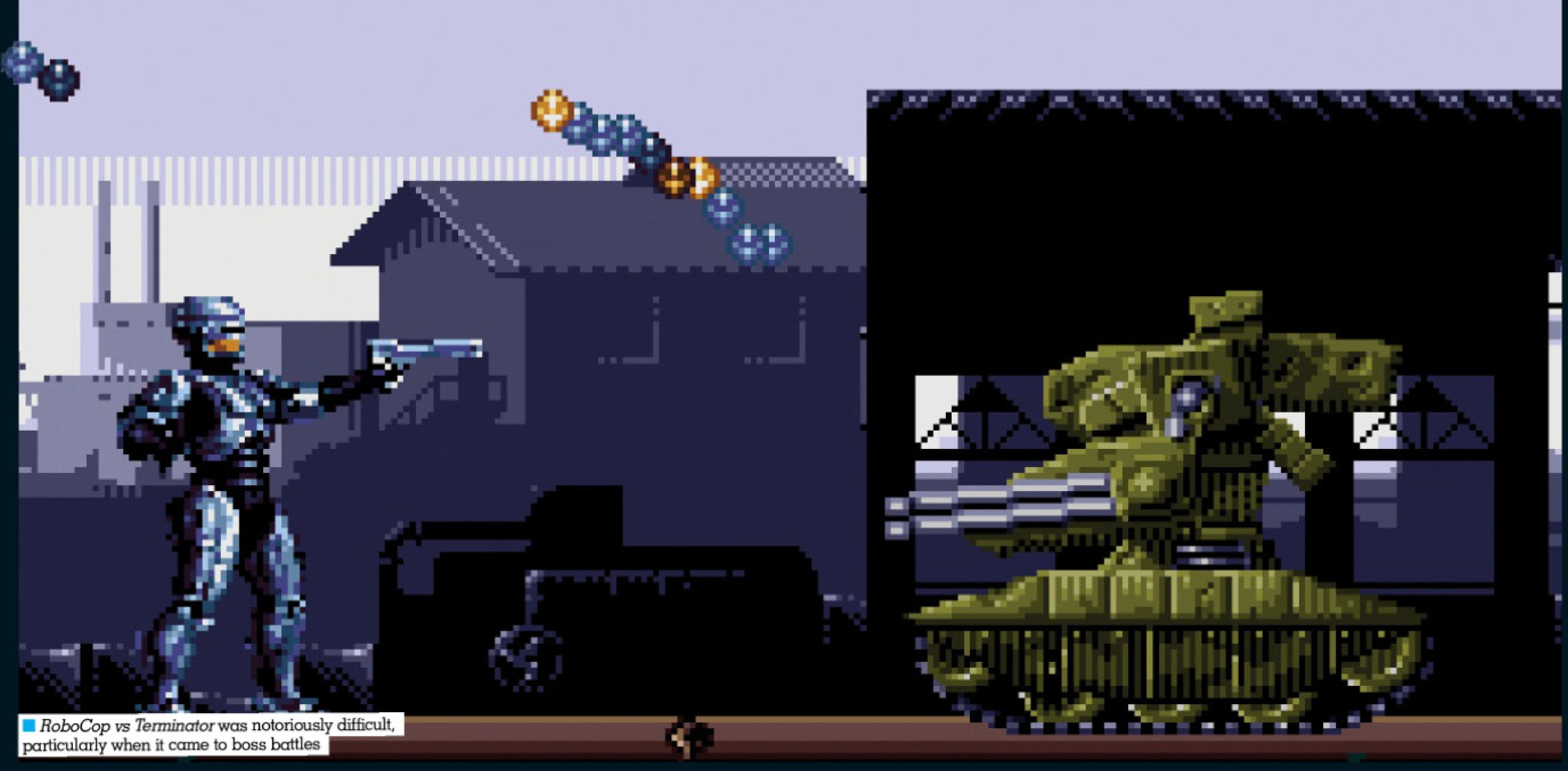
is the best. "Of course, I have to say our Genesis version! But before you roll your eyes I actually have proof: my first focus testing session was actually with the Genesis and SNES versions of *RvT* and we were behind a two-way mirror watching a room full of kids playing the games. Afterwards they pretty much all agreed our version was the best, which was a big relief!" Post-release, John Botti moved on.

"I stayed at Virgin for another nine months or so," he explains, "but smelled an opportunity to start a company for the PlayStation market. I went for it and didn't look back." After working on an open-world driving game called Propaganda for Virgin, Williams departed Virgin as well. "I left after Nick Bruty invited Bob Stevenson and I to join him at Shiny to work on MDK – he had the basic idea for it, and we helped flesh it all out and develop it from there." *RoboCop Vs The Terminator* became a bestseller for Virgin. Despite being unable to use Arnold Schwarzenegger's likeness and other restrictions, the team created a playable, uncomplicated and entertaining game. Friendships were forged, careers were made and a great game was created. As RoboCop himself would tersely proclaim: Excellent.

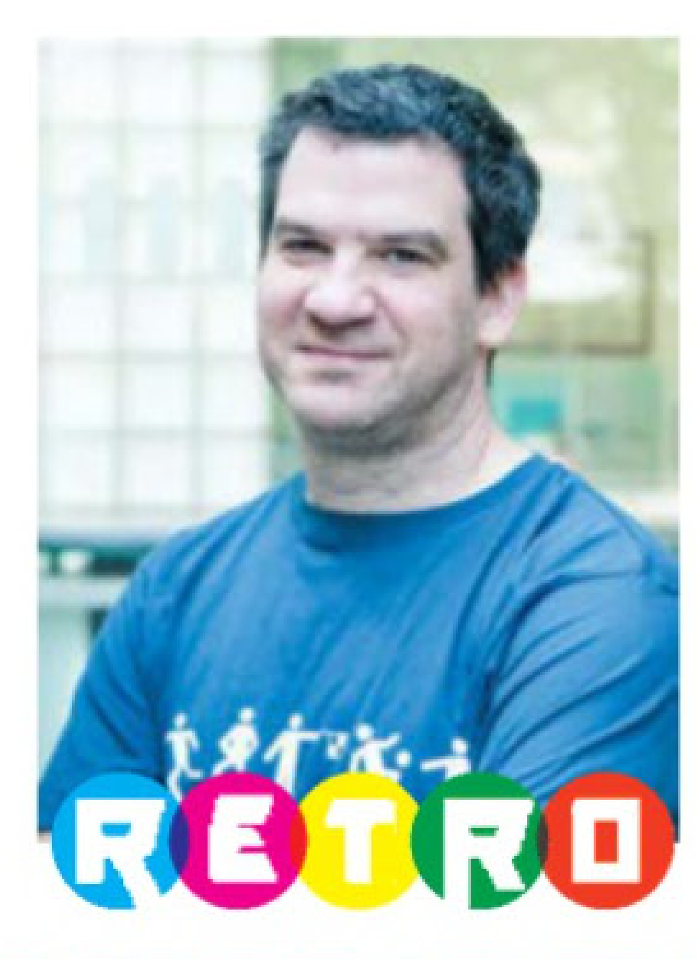
Our special thanks to John Botti and Tim Williams



Even without Schwarzenegger's licence, *RvT* was a big hit.



RoboCop vs Terminator was notoriously difficult, particularly when it came to boss battles



INTERVIEW

MILES JACOBSON

From the terraces of Watford Football Club to mingling with popstars, the managing director of Sports Interactive, Miles Jacobson, saves his biggest cheer for Football Manager

It is the stat-based game that has been blamed for countless divorces, but when Miles Jacobson hooked up with Paul and Oliver Collyer, the brothers behind the footy management sim *Championship Manager*, it was, most certainly, a marriage made in heaven. As a lifelong football fan, Jacobson seized the chance to work with the developers and, under his watch as managing director, he presided over rocketing sales figures and a fan base that would be the envy of football clubs the world over. He was there when *Championship Manager 4* became the fastest-selling PC game of all time in the UK. He was also there when Sports Interactive broke away from Eidos, signed with Sega and started a new franchise called *Football Manager*. Here, he takes a look back over his career, and why he is confident SI will continue to produce top performances for years to come.

You began your career in the music industry – how was it?
Bonkers. I was a little bloke from a dodgy part of Watford who found himself working at Food Records at the very start of Britpop and for most of the way through it as well. I worked with Blur, Jesus Jones, Dubstar, Shampoo, and The Bluetones so I was very much in the thick of it. And I was only a kid.

But you were also a massive football fan?
I started going to watch Watford when I was seven and then from the age of 11 I was a regular at the club. You were actually able to get a season ticket for £1 if you were a kid and went with an adult.

Were you passionate about games too?
Yeah. I'd grown up with three things in my life: music, computer games and football. I grew up playing Spectrum games. The one that I probably spent the most time playing was Kevin Toms' original *Football Manager*, which was a fantastic game for the time. And a bit of *Match Day* as well – just to get John Ritman some recognition.

Did you play non-football games?
Yes. A game called *Starquake*, which was made by a guy called Stephen Crow, which is still a great game if you try and play it now, and also the Ultimate Play The Game games. I was a big gamer at a time when it certainly wasn't cool to be a gamer. I was quite happy being a music geek, a football geek, a sports geek and a games geek. I was geeky about all of it.

I'M NOT GOING TO MAKE OUR GAME LESS COMPELLING TO SAVE A COUPLE OF MARRIAGES

Did you have much contact with the games industry?
When I was at Food Records, I met a lot of people from the games industry because most of them wanted to go and see Blur or Jesus Jones play gigs. I got to know them and I actually started writing some manuals. I did some very bad manuals for very bad games and I eventually met



DEVELOPER COMMENTS

"Miles became involved with SI at the point at which we'd taken what had started as a hobby, got ourselves a publishing deal, taken on a handful of staff and sold enough games to create a bright future for our fledgling company.

At that point, however, it was becoming clear that we lacked the business expertise to take things to the next level, and Miles was instrumental in transforming us into the professional business that we are today; dealing with the demands of the publisher, while still retaining as much as possible of the spirit that had led to our initial success.

Not only that, but as studio director he's been vital in shaping the direction of the game now for many years, which I've certainly been very grateful for having been doing this since I was a teenager. It's been nice for someone else to have taken the reins, and frankly he's done a brilliant job in that respect."

OLIVER COLLYER MBE, FOUNDER SPORTS INTERACTIVE



■ When Wimbledon FC became MK Dons and moved, *Championship Manager 01-02* included a message of support for the fans-created club AFC Wimbledon. Sports Interactive went on to sponsor the team's shirts.

■ Reviewed before it was finished, this was the penultimate game created by SI for Eidos.

Oliver and Paul through someone at Domark who wanted to go and see Blur play.

Did you get on?
Oh yes. We are similar ages. We got on really well. Paul was in a band at the time as well so I used to try and help out a bit.

How did you get more involved with *Championship Manager*?
I used to play it on my Atari ST and I loved it. Then Oliver and Paul asked if I'd be a beta tester for *Championship Manager 2*. I got myself my first PC – a 386 DX PC – so that I could play it and it's the only thing I've ever bought on credit because I don't believe in it. The investment thankfully paid off in the long run but at the time it meant that I was eating pasta with ketchup on it for dinner for many a month.

You became Sports Interactive's unofficial business advisor, didn't you?
It wasn't really unofficial – it was official in that they were telling people and that was the role that I was doing. I just wasn't being paid for it because I had another job and, as I say, I was just helping my mates out.



■ The game has moved on from its simple form of gameplay into something deep and involved.

Why did they ask you?
They really hated dealing with the non-programming side of things. They're both incredibly passionate programmers and two of the best programmers that I've ever worked with, but they weren't interested in the other side of things. I was determined to ensure they didn't get ripped off because I really believed in what they were doing.

Was it a small team back then?
It was. I think I was number five to actually have a job title in the studio, but it was something that needed to be done because they were dealing with a very big publisher [who] was looking after their shareholders in the way that they thought was best.

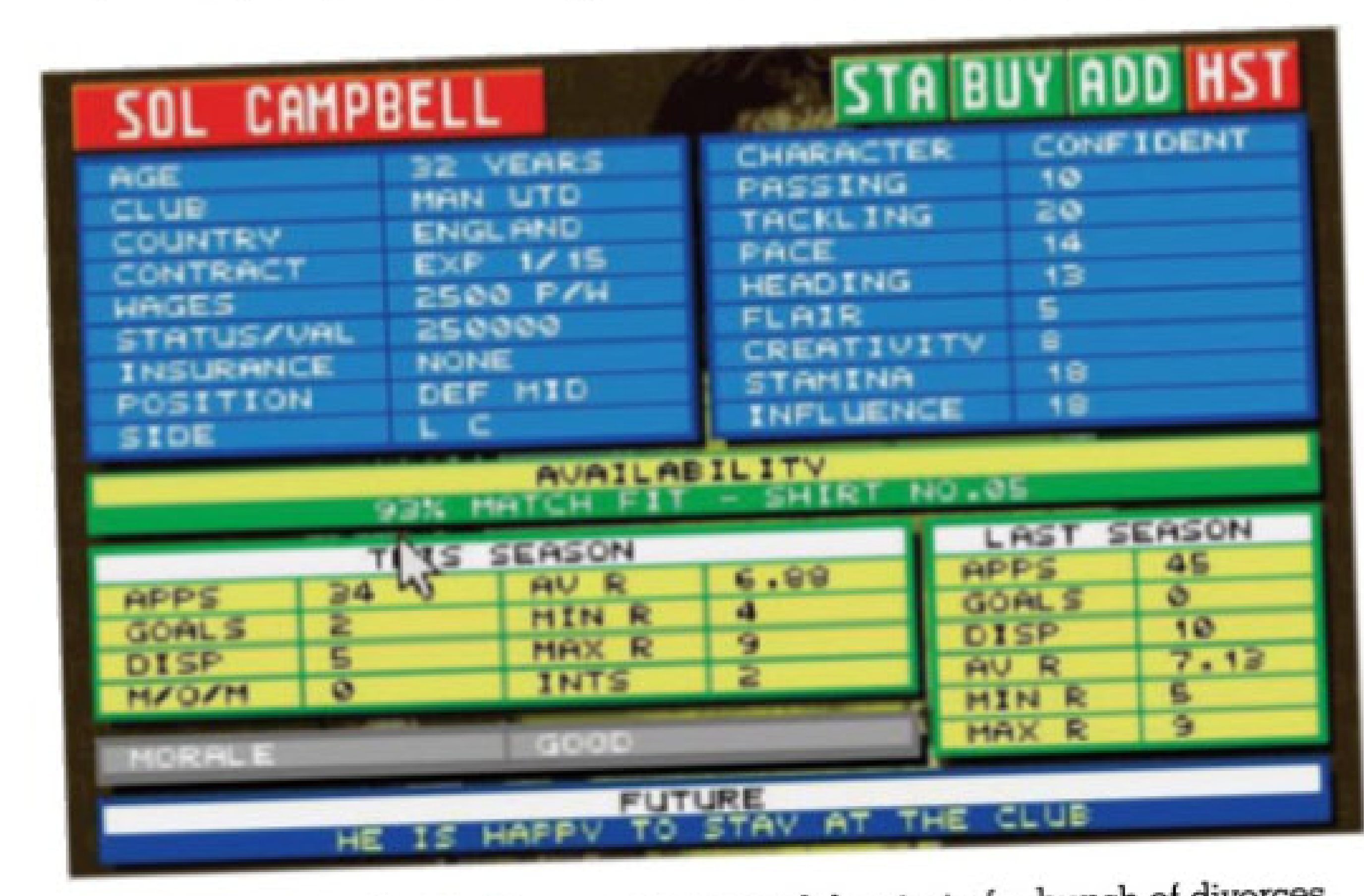
After you started, the company grew massively, didn't it?
Championship Manager 3 was really the first one that exploded. The second game was still very much a cult game and the data update did very well, but by *Champ Man 3* they'd actually been accepted. If you go back and read the reviews of the first couple of games I think *Champ Man 1* might have got a 20% review from somewhere because it didn't have any graphics. The game was pretty much slated apart from a few hardcore journalists who were into their football as well and didn't just require games to have elves or fancy graphics.

What happened with *Championship Manager 4*?
There were about seven or eight people working on *Champ Man 3* and they did a couple of updates for that, but some of the team broke off and worked on *Champ Man 4*. It took a long time to sort – it was six months late and it was a bit of a disaster. It was getting ten out of ten reviews because it had been massively hyped up, and the publisher's marketing people were giving the game to journalists for review six weeks before release and saying, "don't worry, everything that's wrong with it at the moment is going to be fixed". That wasn't really the case until *Champ Man 03/04*, which was our final game with Eidos.

Sports Interactive split from Eidos and went its separate way with *Football Manager*. Was that split a difficult time for you?
It was scary as anything. We'd spent ten years building up a brand and a fan base with *Championship Manager* and we were turning round and going, "right, that's not our game any more, we're making something else". It was like The Beatles changing their name to The Turtles and someone else carrying on with The Beatles name. But we went into it with our eyes open. It was a mutual decision; we just didn't want to work with each other anymore basically.

Why was that?
Eidos had firm views on the way that they wanted to go and we had firm views on the way that we wanted to go.

***Football Manager* ended up being known as the official continuation, though…**
We were helped by a few things. We were allowed to say on the posters for the first year, "from the creators of the *Championship Manager* series" – we ended up doing 92-sheet billboards so that really hammered the point home. Retailers helped – I walked into HMV in Oxford Street the day that the game came out and there was a sticker on the front of it that said "you know it's *Champo*". That had just been done by people working in the stores. We'd also



■ How things used to be. Reams of stats and the start of a bunch of divorces.

built a significant database over the years – we had more than 400,000 people that played our games on a database and we were allowed to send them emails. Word of mouth and mouse were fantastic.

Were you pleased with the sales?
First year expectations were certainly ahead of where we thought we were going to be in the first year. By the second release, we were selling more than we'd ever sold with *Champ Man* before. Lots of people in the industry came to me after *FM 2006* was released and said, "we don't really know how you've done that but well done, we thought it was going to fail".

Obviously the split gave you more creative freedom as well, didn't it?
Very much so, but Sega need to get a lot of credit as well. Sega actually went out and hired people that we wanted to work with on the production side of things and on the marketing side of things as well.

What are you like to work with?
I'm not the easiest person to work with. I have a vision that goes a certain way and I like people to follow that, but when you're working with people for the first time that can be quite difficult for them, whereas when you're working with people you've worked with for a while they learn the best ways to be making suggestions.

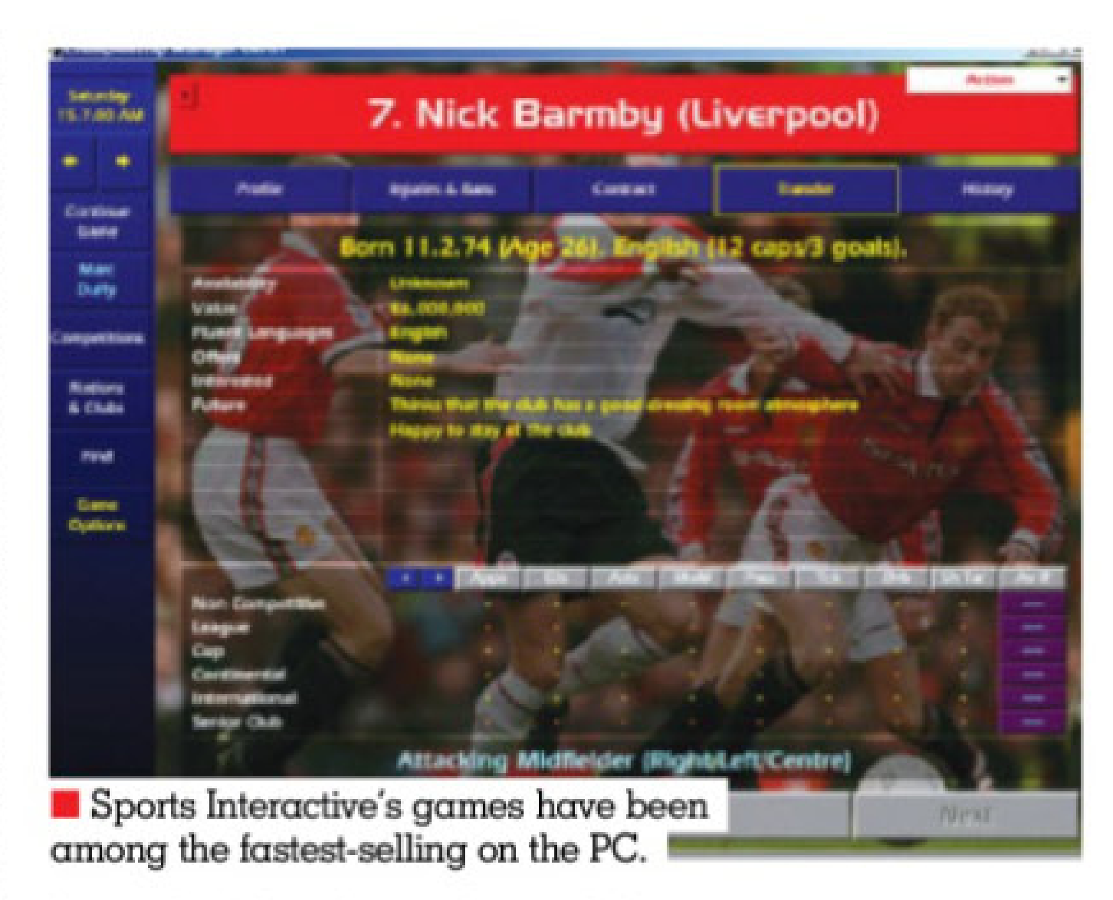
The last version of *Championship Manager* so far was released in 2010. Do you see *Football Manager* carrying on for quite a long time to come?
I hope so, otherwise I've got to go and get a proper job and I don't really want one of those! We have enough ideas at the moment that, if we never had another idea again, there will be another three *Football Managers*. We come up with more ideas a year than we have time to do in an annual version, which is why we've got the backlog.

So you've worked out the features for the next few releases?
The feature set for *FM15* is nailed, the one for *FM16* is probably 80 per cent nailed, and I've got some features down for *FM17* and *FM18*. There's a lot more we still want to do.

As well as having a lot of fans you also have a lot of people getting involved…
We've got the world's largest scouting network. Back in the day it was about finding a bunch of mates who knew a lot about football and getting their mates involved and getting their mates involved and then someone had a pen pal in Italy and so on. The network keeps growing and growing and growing.

Did David Moyes ask to use the database when he was at Everton?
It was David Moyes' scouting team but he wasn't the first – it was Ray Houghton, Crystal Palace's assistant manager. He used to phone up and say, "we're looking for a left back and would you give me some stats," and then I'd send him a list of players to go and look at. A couple of them got bought over the years.

IT WAS LIKE THE BEATLES CHANGING THEIR NAME TO THE TURTLES AND SOMEONE CARRYING ON WITH THE BEATLES NAME



Sports Interactive's games have been among the fastest-selling on the PC.

If there's an issue for *Football Manager*, it's piracy. How does it affect you?
Pirates are going to pirate. I think *FM13* didn't get cracked for six months yet was still played by 13 million pirates, and when you're selling around a million copies a year that's quite a big multiple. We've had piracy problems for years.

FM's been blamed for a lot of divorces…
We were told we were blamed for 35 in one year. We still don't know if that stat is true or not but most of us in the studio have split up with someone over the game. Like anything compelling, it can sometimes get a bit out of control, and if a partner doesn't understand that then so be it. I'm not going to make our game less compelling, less fun, so that people play it less to save a couple of marriages, that's not going to happen.

You're also the founder of Games Aid and you're also involved with War Child. Does that take up a lot of your time?
Six of us decided to found Games Aid out of the ashes the Entertainment Software Charity. I was a trustee of Games Aid for two years. With War Child I'm involved on both a personal and a work level; War Child get a donation for every game that we sell. So the people who buy the game have raised over £1m for War Child, just by doing nothing apart from playing the game, which I think is great. I'm a vice-president of Special Effect too. They do amazing work with people with disabilities playing games.

And you've been personally recognised: you received an OBE in 2011…
I met Prince Charles. It was a brilliant day out for my mum and my sister. My mum got a nice new dress out of it and a new hat and a pair of shoes and it was brilliant. I've got a medal, so I feel like Mutley from Wacky Racers would have felt like if Dick Dastardly had actually given him a proper medal. It's such an honour.

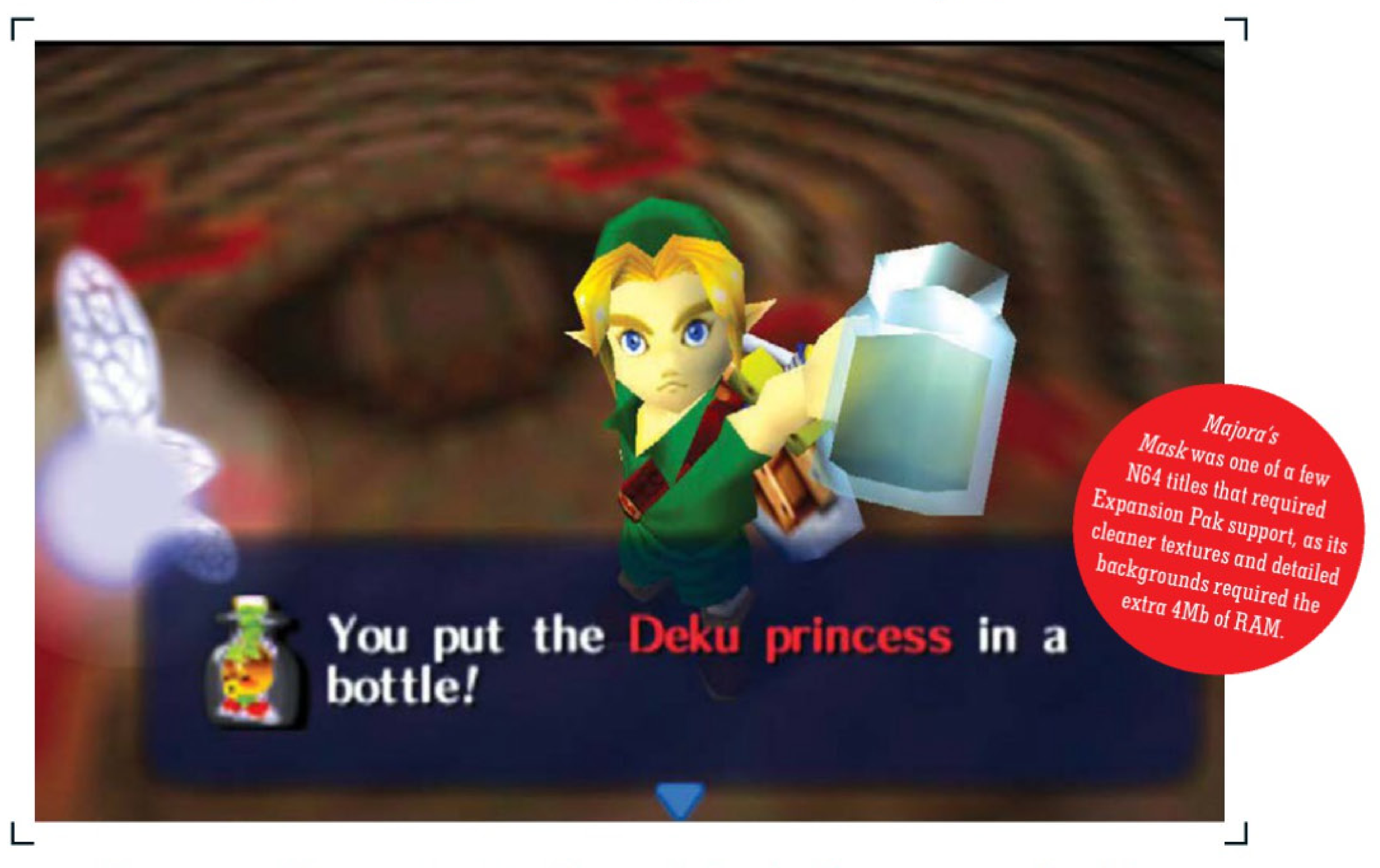


The debut *Football Manager* game by Sports Interactive was *Football Manger 2005*.

GAME CHANGERS

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: MAJORA'S MASK

Released: 2000 **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** Nintendo EAD **System:** N64



Majora's Mask was one of a few N64 titles that required Expansion Pak support, as its cleaner textures and detailed backgrounds required the extra 4Mb of RAM.

Succeeding one of the most critically acclaimed titles ever made, this more nuanced Zelda entry is an example of a game that was way ahead of its time

DESPITE ITS BRILLIANCE, it almost seems anarchic to claim that *Majora's Mask* is a more forward-thinking and influential title than its older sibling, *Ocarina Of Time*. Although *Ocarina* revolutionised 3D gaming, tearing up the adventure game rulebook in the process, *Majora's Mask* was a work of experimentation and, ultimately, innovation. Through building upon the wonderful framework pioneered by the previous game, Nintendo managed to push its 64-bit console to the limit and in the process created a franchise entry with an unprecedented amount of depth.

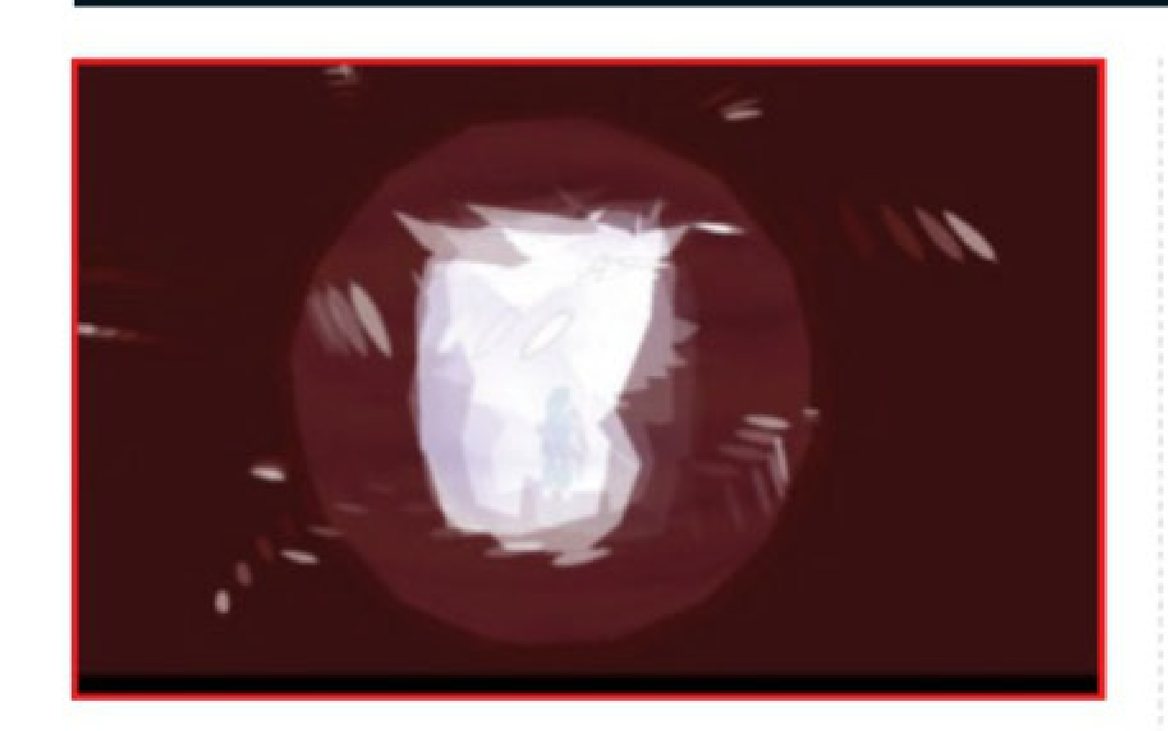
This depth arises from multiple junctures. Although the basics of the game are the same as that of *Ocarina*, *Majora's Mask* is more a manifestation of creativity than a tour de force of mechanical design. Seen in the game are various concepts that weren't present in *Ocarina Of Time*, and so at its root it feels more like a work of heart – a risky yet confident segue into uncharted territory for the series.

Of course the exemplary gameplay and graphics inherent in *Ocarina Of Time* had been brought forward for Link's second N64 outing. The game was built in the same engine as its predecessor and utilised the same graphics package, therefore enabling the development team to turn the game around in only a year, compared to the four-year development cycle enjoyed by *Ocarina*. The same combat returned – complete with strange camera mechanics – as did a focus on dungeon crawling and elements of open-world exploration. However, this is where the comparisons to *Ocarina* end.

In narrative terms *Majora's Mask* strikes a more adult chord. Opening with Link riding through a misty forest to search for a friend, the game introduces the Skull Kid, sporting the game's eponymous facial attire. This mask was stolen from the Happy Mask Shop salesman, found in Hyrule market in *Ocarina Of Time*, and he hints at an ancient apocalyptic power that resides within it. Link enters Clock Town in

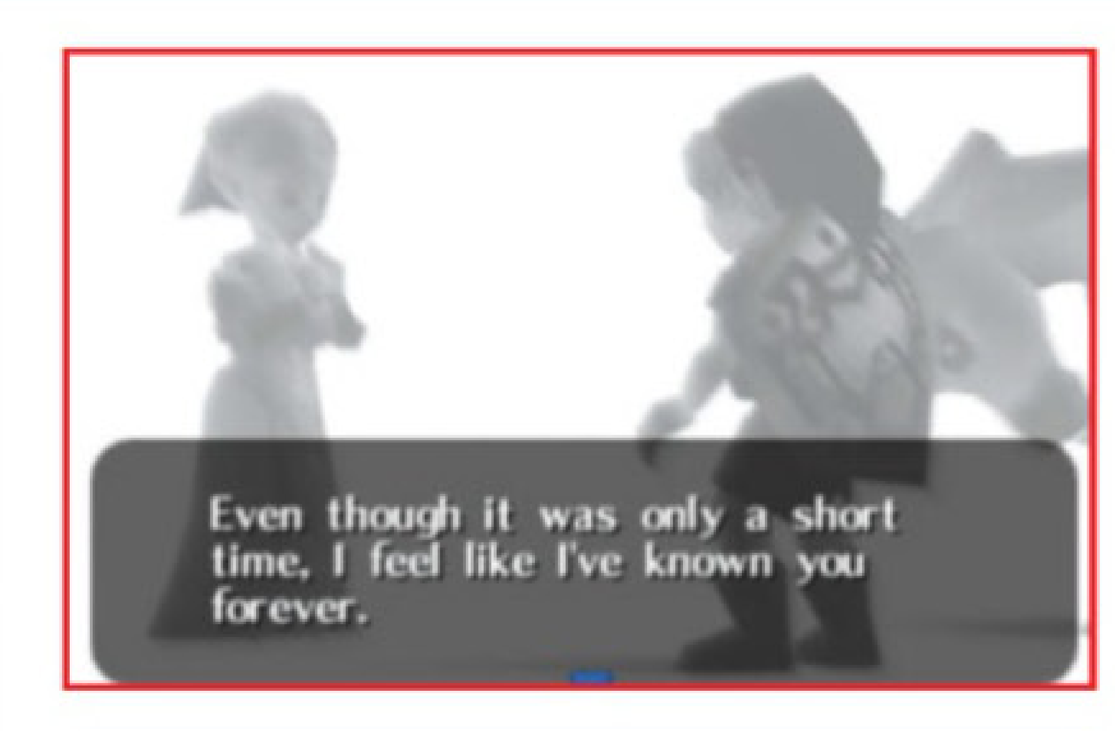
ADVENTURE TIME

MAJORA'S MASK PROVED ITSELF TO BE A MORE THOUGHTFUL EXAMPLE OF THE ADVENTURE GENRE WITH THESE SPECIAL ELEMENTS



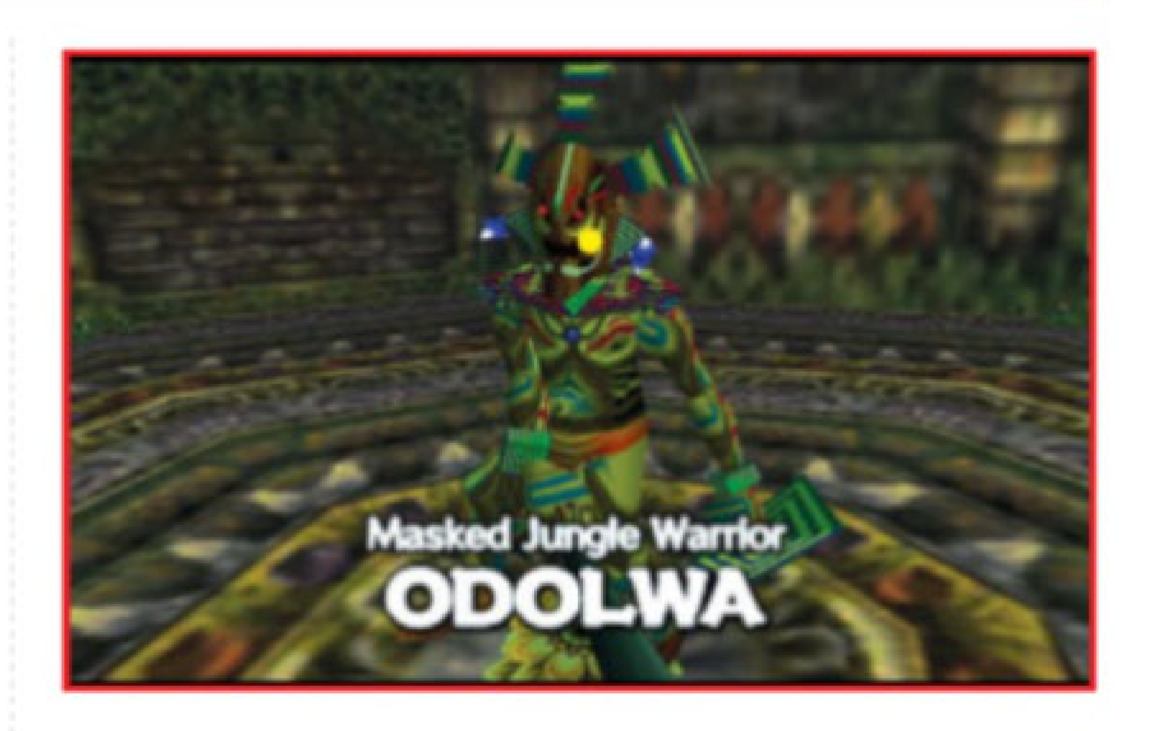
FAST TRAVEL

★ Unlike in earlier *Zelda* titles, Link is able to fast travel in *Majora's Mask*, which goes some way to mitigating the effects of the real-time cycle. Although we are used to seeing far bigger game worlds nowadays, the land of Termina was pretty large for its time and trekking across it with only six in-game hours left is not exactly a formula for fun.



SENTIMENT

★ The *Zelda* series has always done a sterling job of providing moments of emotional heft. These are littered throughout *Majora's Mask* – from seeing the Skull Kid embracing two fairies and crying because he's lonely to the moment when Link experiences a flashback to talking to Princess Zelda, everything here carries a certain weight.



BOSSES

★ The franchise has never been short of excellent boss fights, but a couple of the mayors in *Majora's Mask* really stand out. Pictured here is the boss at the end of Woodfall Temple, one of the four giants that Link has to face to prevent the moon from falling. The main event against *Majora's Mask* on the moon is one of the best in the whole franchise.

the land of Termina to find the moon will fall from the sky after three days and destroy the world.

Link sets about conquering four dungeons and the giants within in order to force them out of hiding to stop the moon from falling, enabling him to go up to the moon and face the Skull Kid and Majora's Mask once and for all. This threat carries weight where the likes of Ganondorf never could, as the moon is visibly sinking lower in the sky with every second that passes, and conversations with NPCs reveal their thoughts on the imminent apocalypse.

Masks play far more of a role in the game than they did in *Ocarina*, with a select few proving necessary to progress in the game and allowing Link to shape-shift. These few masks are simple to obtain, however the larger proportion of the 24 masks available in the game require very specific criteria to be met, often at very specific times throughout the game's three-day cycle. This feature still hasn't seen a rival outside of the RPG space to this day. That an action-adventure would display such intricacies is still impressive 14 years later, and highlights the astute nature of the game's design.

THE MOST INTERESTING CONCEPTS ARE THE GAME'S REAL-TIME ASPECT AND TIME TRAVEL MECHANICS

KEY FACTS

- *Majora's Mask* necessitated the use of the N64's Expansion Pak, so rumours were abound at the time that it was originally a project intended for the 64DD.
- At the beginning of the game Link is seen travelling through a forest, in search for a friend that isn't named. However, it is considered in all circles to most likely be Navi from *Ocarina Of Time.*
- Many character designs from *Ocarina* appear in *Majora's Mask*, although not one recurring character recognises Link and no explanation is offered why they now inhabit Termina instead of Hyrule.

In typical Nintendo fashion the art direction is incredible and the series' ability to neatly theme dungeons and areas around elemental factors are no more apparent than in *Majora's Mask*. Most surprising is the depiction of the moon's surface, as when Link arrives it is revealed to be a vast, colourful field with a lone tree at its centre – further proof of the game's unwillingness to resort to the familiar.

However, the most interesting concepts at work in *Majora's Mask* are the game's real-time aspect and, in turn, its time travel mechanics as well. Due to the game's aforementioned three-day cycle, it becomes necessary for Link to use the Ocarina of Time to travel backwards and forwards as he requires. The entire three-day cycle in-game equates to around an hour in real time and is one of the earliest examples of an accomplished real-time system.

A ranch in the south-west of the game world is obstructed by a large boulder, being hacked at by a builder. Return on the third and final day and the boulder has been removed in a tangible way – it takes the builder two days to destroy it, and so the ranch and its associated side-quests are only available when his task is complete. In turn, heading back into Clock Town towards the end of the last day, the player will find it near empty, as most residents have fled in advance of the impending apocalypse.

By introducing the three-day cycle Nintendo incorporated a wonderful narrative framework and a means to cram a vast experience into a cartridge, as the predetermined environmental occurrences are allowed to repeat themselves infinitely when Link travels back to the dawn of the first day, requiring less memory. Through all of these elements *Majora's Mask* rivalled the acclaim of its predecessor and remains a challenging and curious experience.



TIME BANDITS

MAJORA'S MASK BROUGHT UNORTHODOX TIME MECHANICS TO THE TABLE, BUT SEVERAL OTHER TITLES OVER THE YEARS HAVE BENT THE RULES OF TIME AND SPACE



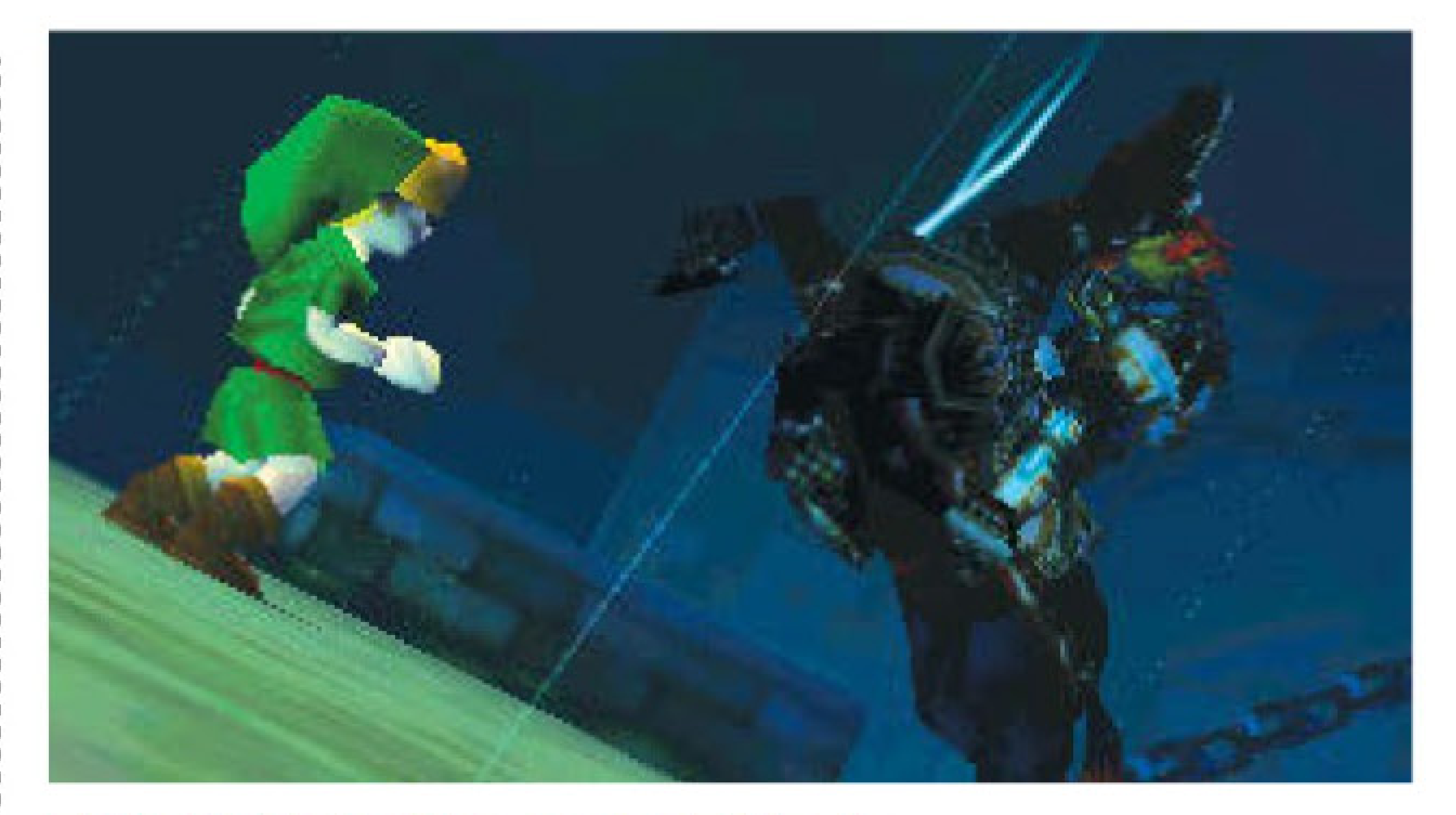
BLINX: THE TIME SWEEPER

A GAME THAT was billed as an essential early exclusive for the original Xbox, *Blinx* allowed players to slow down, speed up and stop time altogether using the titular character's vacuum cleaner. What was interesting here was the time limit of ten minutes for each stage, nudging the player into the position where the game's time mechanics weren't just a gimmick, but essential to progression. Outside of these mechanics, however, *Blinx: The Time Sweeper* didn't particularly inspire, amounting to a slightly above average platformer with action elements.



F1 2013

AN INTERESTING ADDITION to this list, yet *F1 2013* uses time mechanics to fix your problems. Having hurtled off the track after a frantic manoeuvre through a corner, players can rewind the action to correct their mistakes. Although the amount of times this function is available is limited, it feels like a strange addition. The *F1* games are known for being hardcore, and by adding this mechanic Codemasters may be guilty of acquiescing to accessibility.



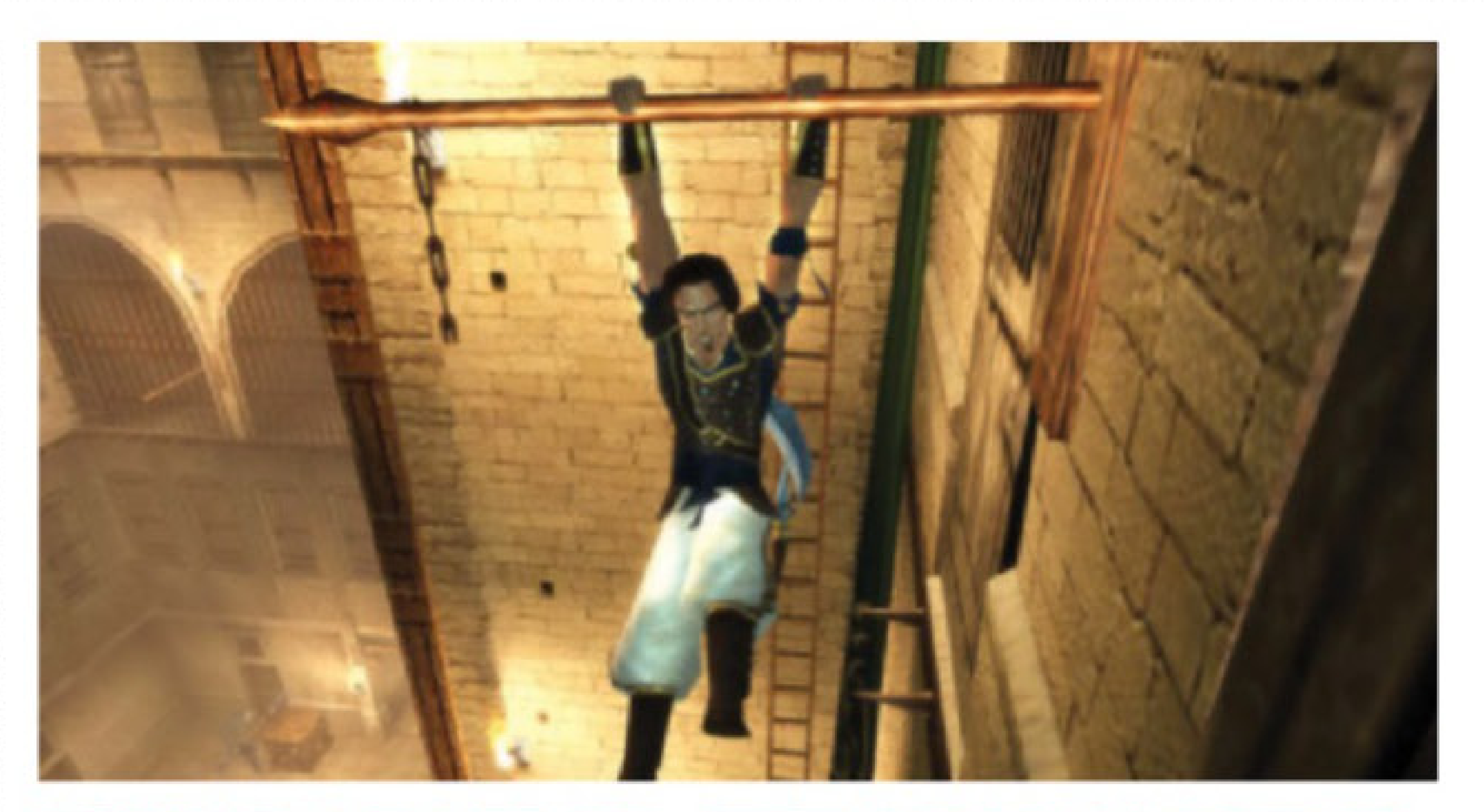
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME

THE PREDECESSOR TO *Majora's Mask*, *Ocarina Of Time* allowed players to manipulate time. By heading to the Temple of Time in Hyrule Market Link can remove the Master Sword from its pedestal to travel forward in time. This pushes the narrative forward: by replacing the sword you can return to being a child, affecting what happens in the future, and completeing specific side-quests.



CHRONO TRIGGER

■ ANOTHER INNOVATIVE TITLE, and an even earlier example of time travel as a gameplay element. Square's RPG was highly experimental; its time travel component allowed players to travel to different locations and eras, with past events affecting the future. Despite achieving huge success in Japan, a European release for the SNES never happened.



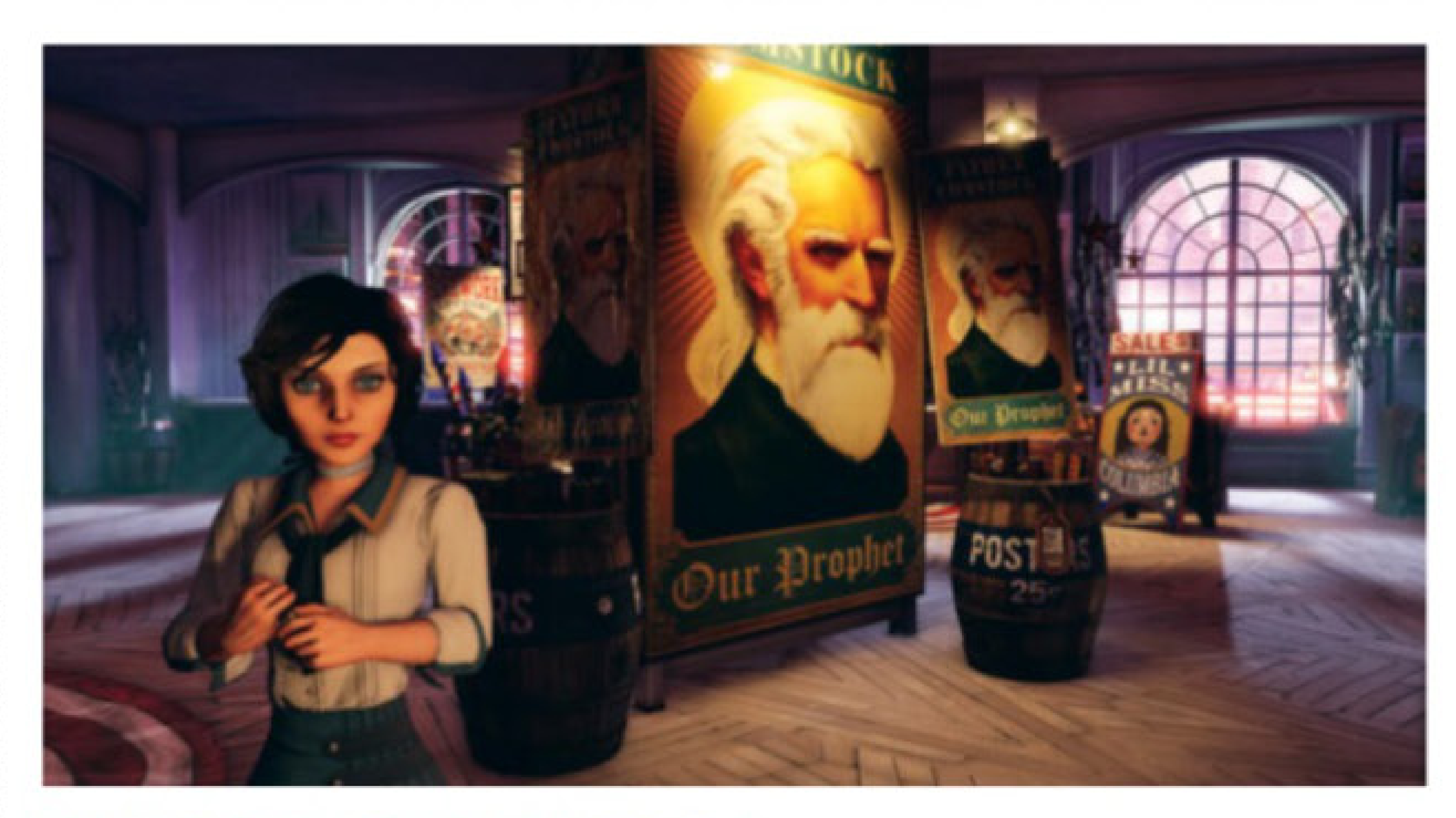
PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME

■ UBISOFT'S ACTION-PLATFORMER was a success upon its release in 2003. Controlling the titular prince, players were faced with dungeons rife with chasms to traverse and enemies to defeat – but the player can rewind time to avoid death. The prince can also use the Dagger of Time to slow time down when attacking enemies, placing the outcome of the fight in the player's hands.



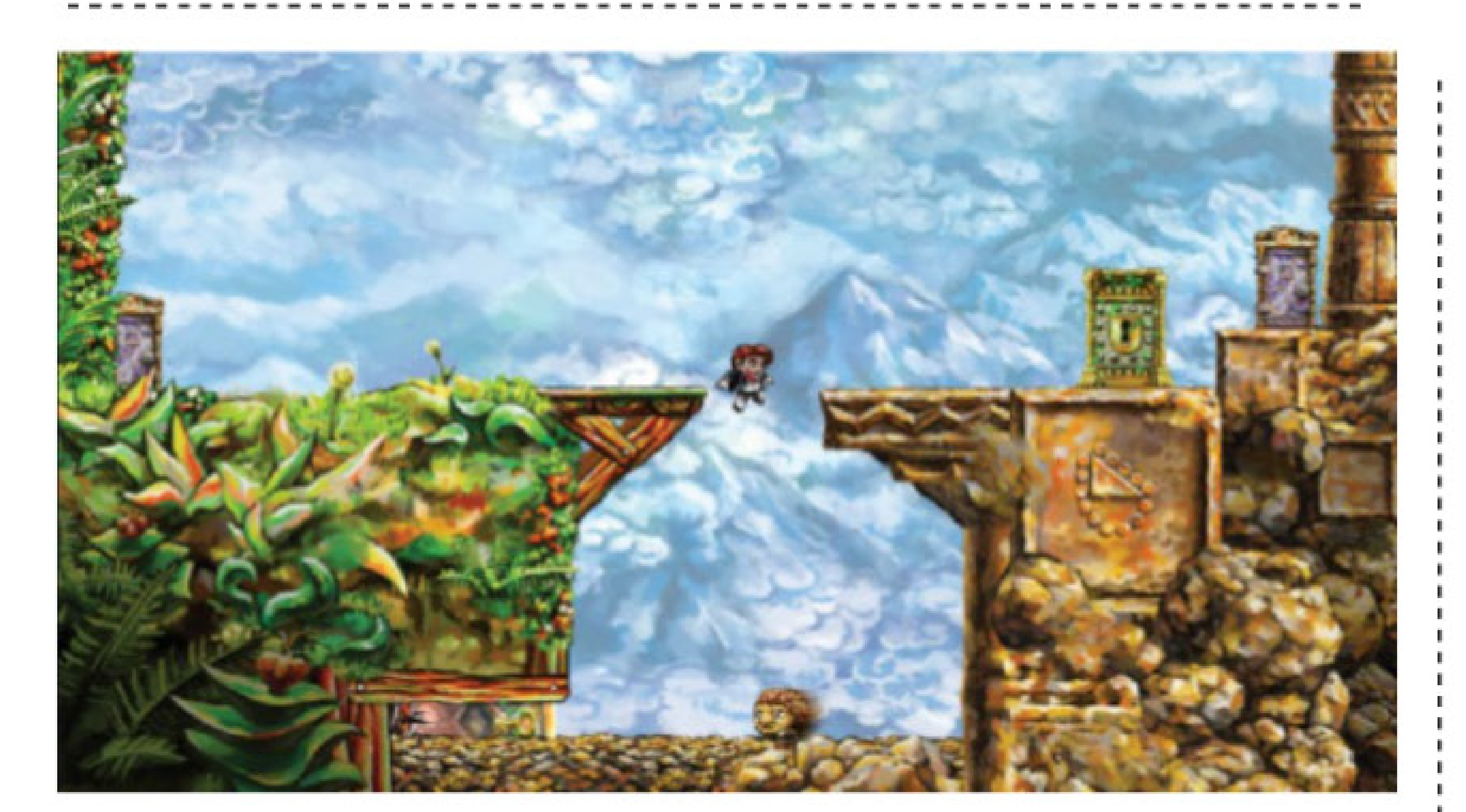
LIGHTNING RETURNS: FINAL FANTASY XIII

■ THE FINALE OF the *Final Fantasy XIII* trilogy features a real-time aspect. NPCs are found in different areas at different times, necessitating the need to learn their patterns to maximise their respective side-quests. At 6am on each game day, Lightning can extend the game clock by a day if prerequisites are met, buying the player precious time before the game clock winds down.



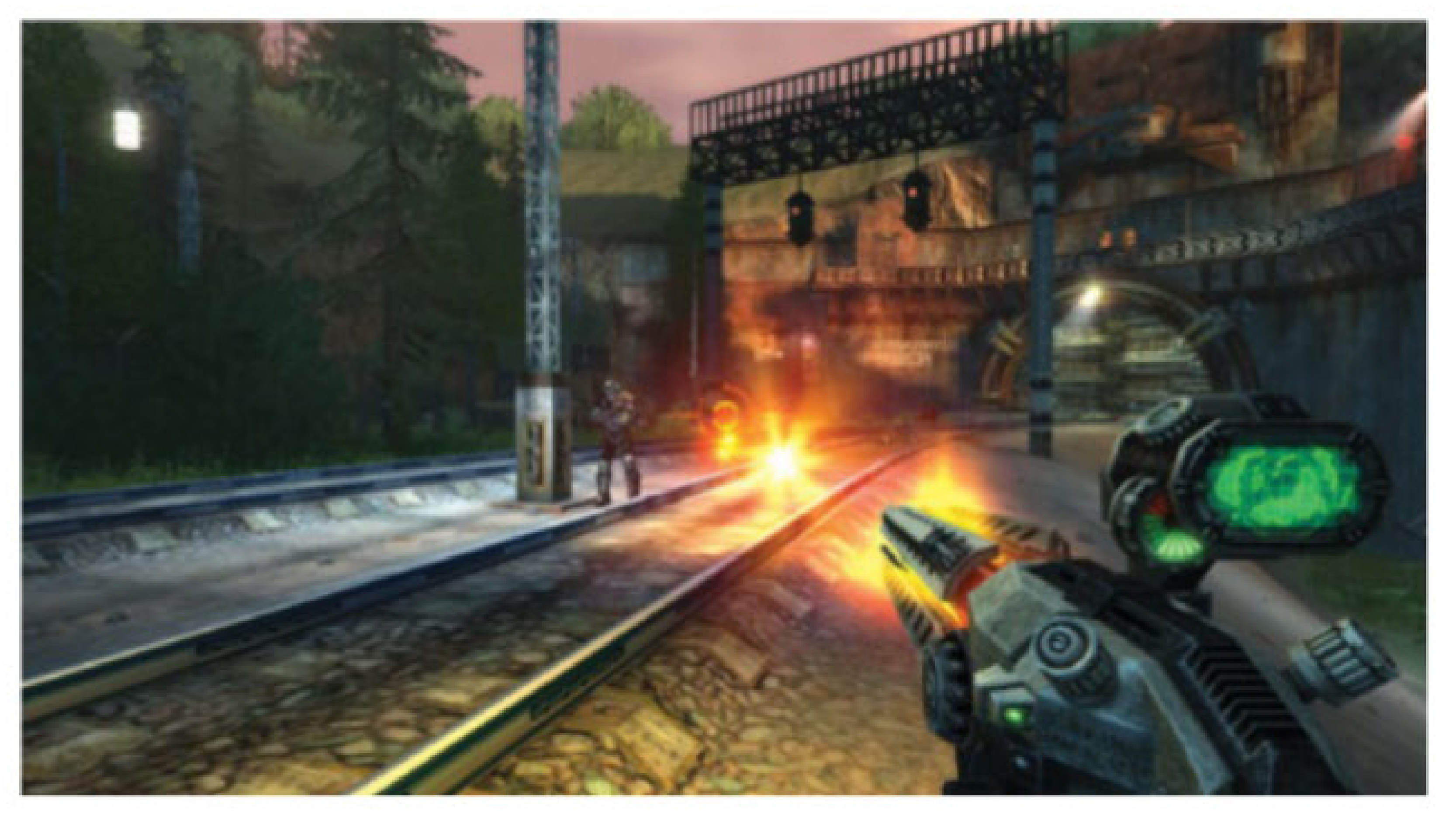
BIOSHOCK INFINITE

■ ELIZABETH COMSTOCK'S ABILITY to open tears between dimensions and time periods not only serves as a narrative device but also adds a new dynamic to the gameplay. The stunning FPS deals with particle physics, religious fervour and crippling guilt, but towards the end of the story Elizabeth's mind-bending abilities come to the fore, resulting in the game wandering off down several separate timelines.



BRAID

■ JONATHAN BLOW'S PASSION project became one of the first 'indie darlings' upon its release back in 2008, and played with time in a way that had never been seen before in a side-scrolling 2D platform game. Players guide Tim through screens solving platform puzzles and have the ability to reverse time, even after dying. The effects vary across chapters, resulting in a deep game that became the highest-rated game on Xbox Live for some time.



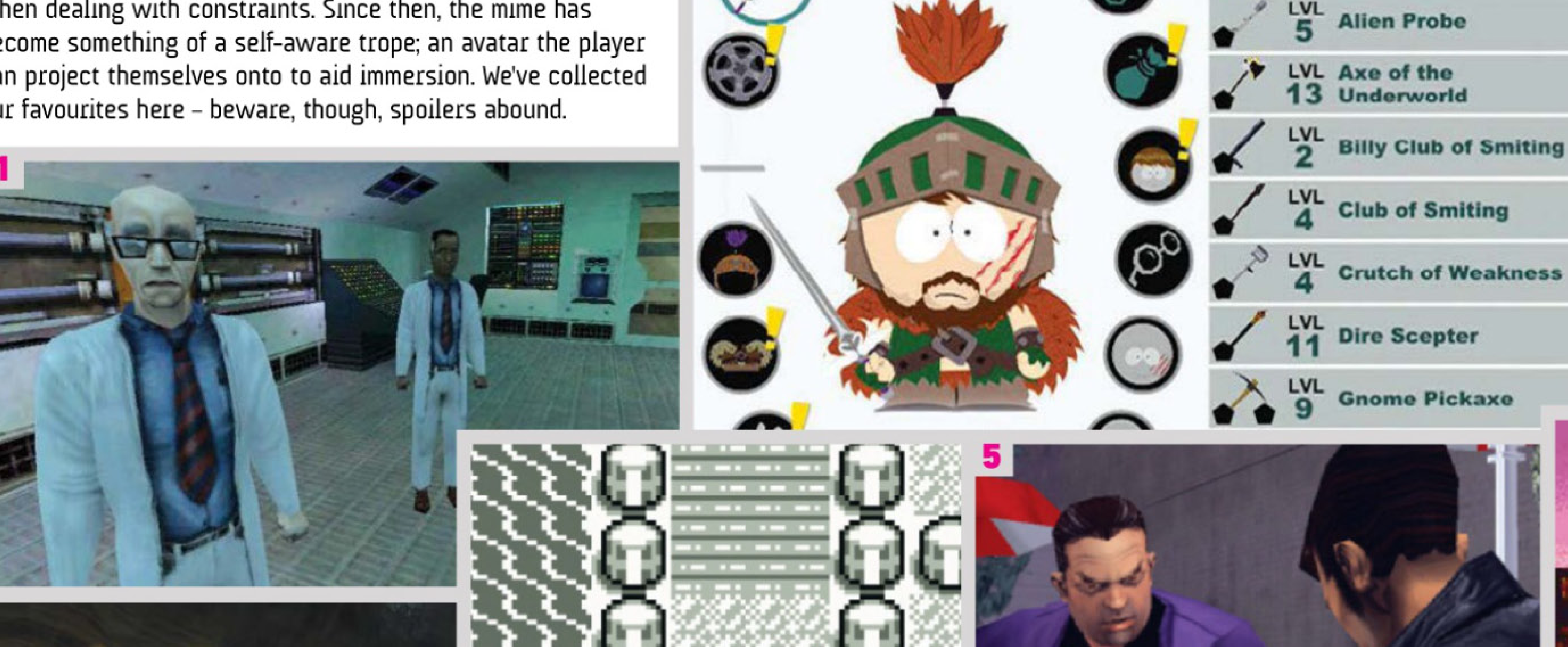
TIMESHIFT

■ PUBLISHED BY SIERRA Entertainment after the project was passed on from Atari, TimeShift charted the actions of Dr Krone, a scientist who travels back to the Thirties and assumes control of society. The player travels back to 1939 to confront Krone and restore natural order, eventually defeating him. The player-character has a time-altering arsenal built-in to the suit the protagonist is wearing, allowing him to slow time, stop it or rewind it.

ESSENTIALS

10 SILENT PROTAGONISTS

The silent protagonist was a trope in gaming because having a central character requiring no voice made sense when dealing with constraints. Since then, the mime has become something of a self-aware trope; an avatar the player can project themselves onto to aid immersion. We've collected our favourites here – beware, though, spoilers abound.









Gordon Freeman
From: Half Life

1 The most iconic everyman you are likely to find in videogames, Gordon Freeman is often referred to by his colleagues and allies as a 'man of few words'. This results in the supporting cast speaking on his behalf, often interpreting the direction the Free Man is looking in as a direction of his interest. Interestingly, there is a theory knocking around that Gordon has a stress-induced illness that causes him to freeze up and become silent when he's particularly suffering. When you actually think about the events that occur in the *Half Life* series, all of which are pretty stressful, we can't say we'd rule out that theory straight away.

Subject Delta
From: BioShock 2

2 Unlike his predecessor, Jack Ryan from *BioShock*, Project Delta has absolutely no lines of dialogue throughout the entire game. This is because, as a Big Daddy, Delta's body has been grafted into the iconic diving suit the Daddys all wear and, as such, has seen irreparable modifications to his vocal cords. Delta not only has a narrative reason for his silence, but also a developmental one: 2K has stated that Delta's true name was never revealed in-game in order to retain the intimacy built between player and character, with the player creating their own name and personality for the Big Daddy.

The New Kid
From: South Park: The Stick Of Truth

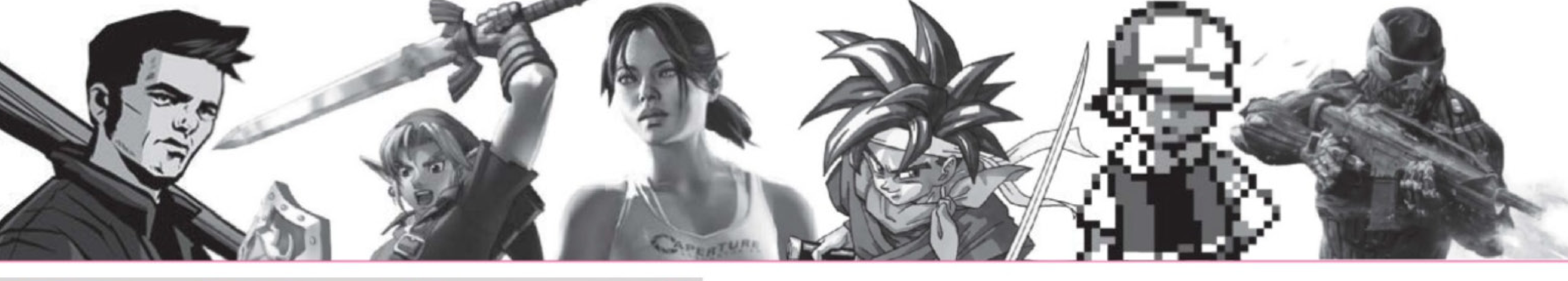
3 In typical *South Park* style, Trey and Matt repeatedly played with the conventions of what having a silent protagonist in your game can achieve. Rather than make the New Kid a passive and beige character, he turned out to be a chaotic force within the town of South Park; with the amazing ability to make new friends quickly, he was sought out by many factions in the war for the Stick of Truth. From cameo characters remarking on your verbal avoidance to your own parents positively begging you to speak, the New Kid's muteness is a frequently revisited joke that somehow never seems to get boring.

Red
From: Pokémon Red

4 We've only gone with *Red* here because he's the default encounter in the first-generation sequels, *Gold* and *Silver*. Red is a boy of few words, and his silence throughout the first game is played with nicely when you encounter him atop Mount Silver at the end of the Generation Two games. It's quite pleasant to see a silent protagonist maintain their mute status after their job as player character has come to an end – usually sequels and spinoffs see silents become vocals. We never thought a simple '….' could be so impactful until we took down Red's last Pokémon. Truly emotional, yet completely non-verbal.

Claude
From: Grand Theft Auto III

5 The first 3D *GTA* game, and truly open-world sandbox set in a modern city, Claude's lack of speech was a choice implemented due to the restrictions of the time, rather than any methodical narrative reason. Rockstar claimed that doing motion-captured cutscenes, which hadn't been done before on the scale they were doing them, just wouldn't have worked if they had to find a way of making the main character interact with everyone too. Claude is an example of a character that continues to be mute in later appearances, when his silence unnerves CJ in *San Andreas*, prompting the mouthy protagonist to call him a 'mute asshole'.

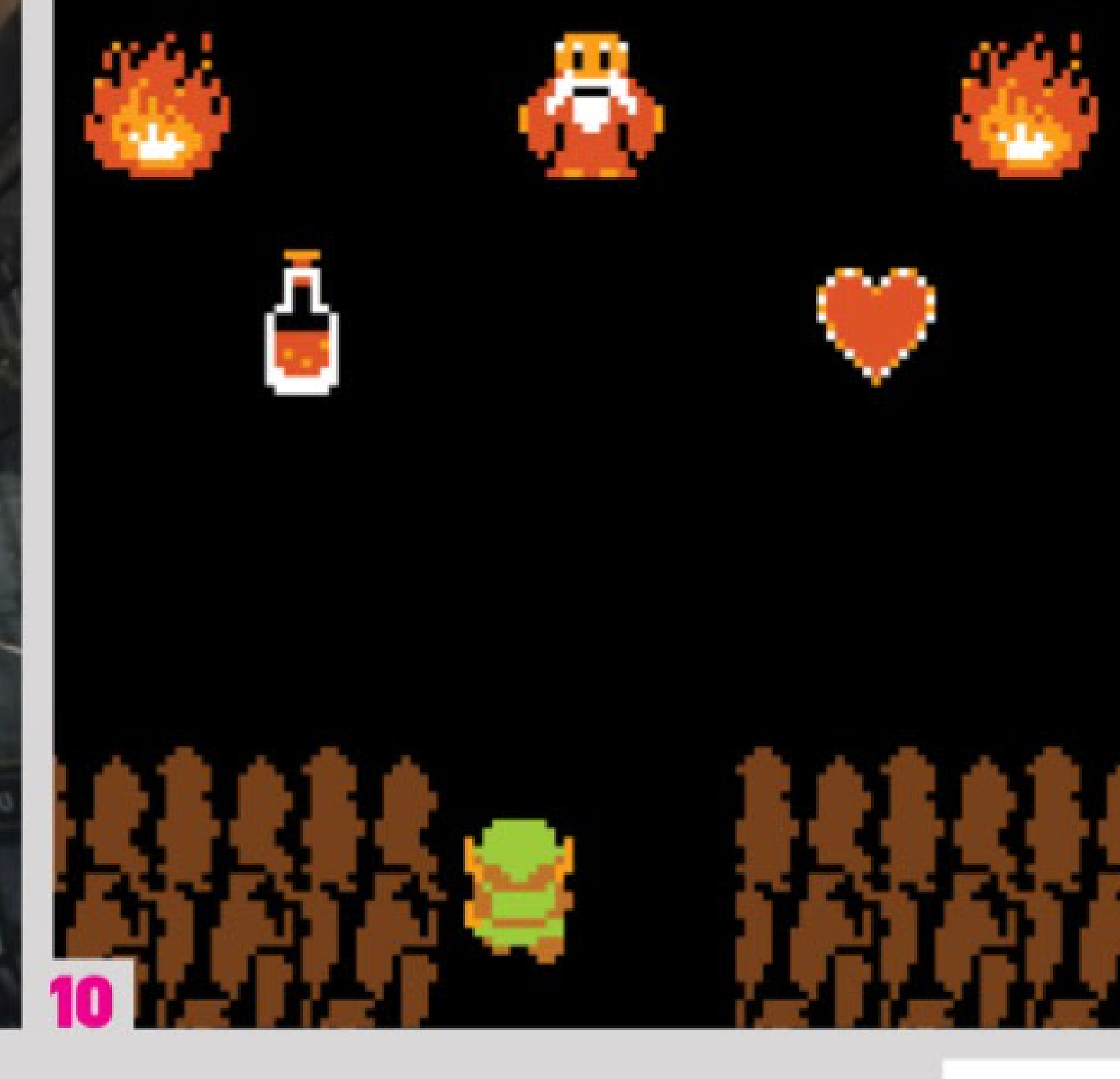












Crono
From: Chrono Trigger

6 The way Squaresoft pulled off Crono's character in *Chrono Trigger* is testament to how the silent protagonist can be used to aid player immersion. Like many heroic mimes, you could input your own choice of name instead of the default Crono – a name that was then referred to often by NPCs in-game. Combine that with an everyman-emphatic backstory and you've got a very well crafted character in Crono… even with zero lines of dialogue. Considering one of his endings can warrant the reply 'Crono talked!' from an ally, this is the perfect reward and makes you want to learn more about him.

Chell
From: Portal

7 'Are you even listening to me?' asks GLaDOS sadly, at one point after the mad AI spends a vast amount of time reeling off a monologue, to be met with decided muteness. When asked if Chell was indeed mute, the game's co-writer (Erik Wolpaw) suggests that she's probably just annoyed at her circumstances: "I always had this feeling of Chell as a character who's just pissed off the entire time at having to do this," he explains, "and just not giving them the pleasure of saying anything. She probably can talk." After finding out Chell is just being difficult, we liked her character even more.

Alcatraz
From: Crysis 2

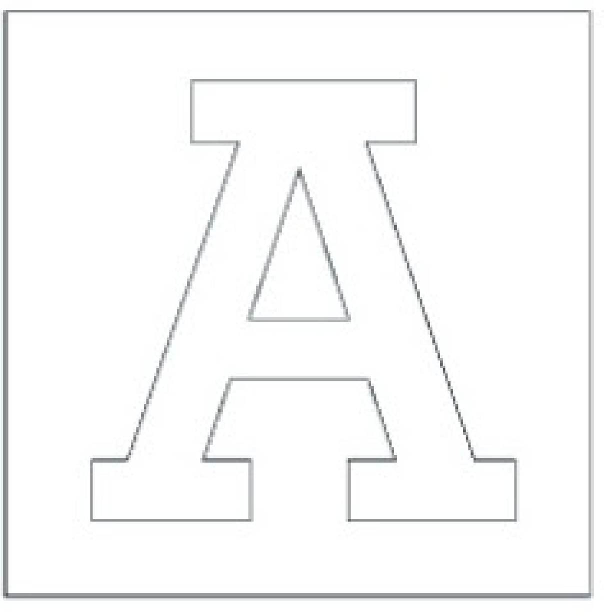
8 It's probably for the best that *Crysis 2*'s main man is a mute, considering the rest of the cast come across as underdeveloped and one-dimensional, seemingly all built on opposing poles just so they can shout at each other. Apparently Crytek wanted to deliver an experience similar to *Half Life 2*, keeping the player immersed and not deviating from the first-person view you have as Alcatraz. His silence is justified too – having suffered fatal injuries in the intro, specifically to his lungs and vocal cords, only his suit keeps him alive, assumedly not bothering to restore non-vital bodily mechanics (re: speech).

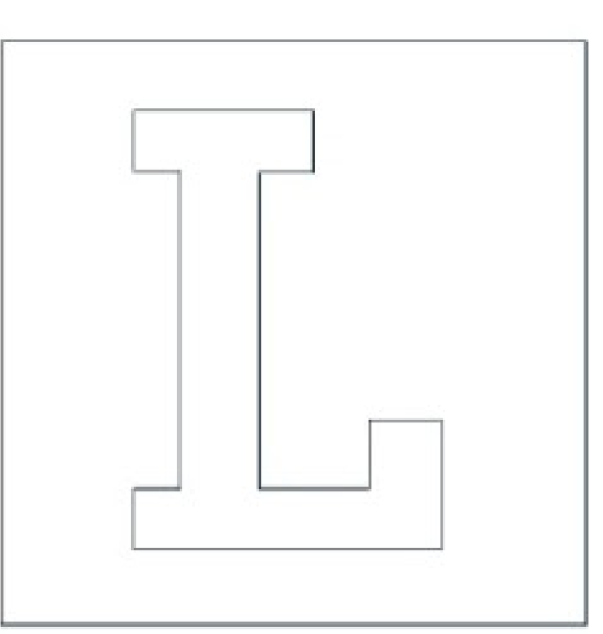
Jak
From: Jak & Daxter

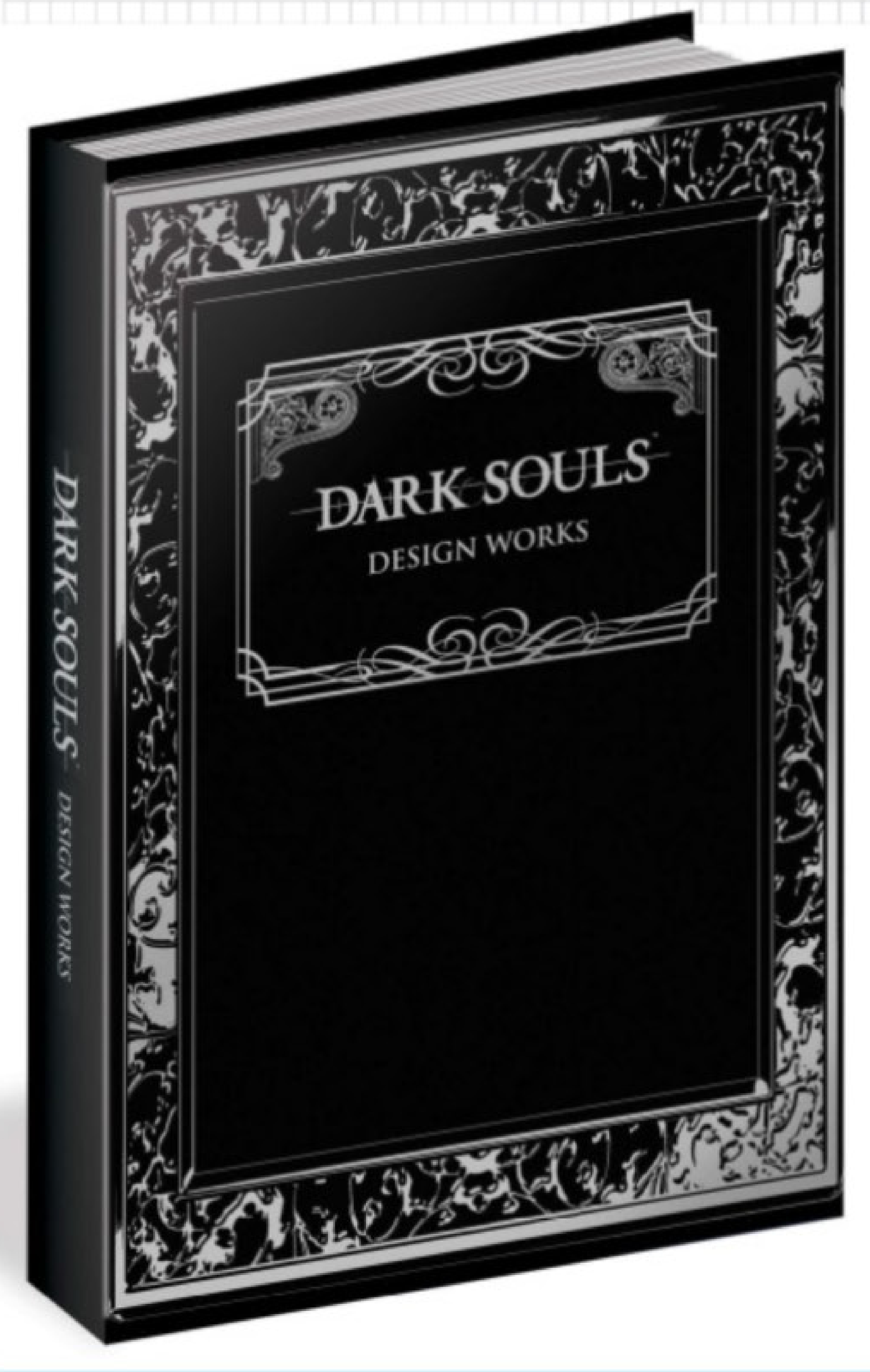
9 In the sequels, Jak becomes a mouthy, out-spoken rebel (maybe the Dark Eco experiments are to blame for that…), but in the first game, Naughty Dog plays it straight by making its hero a silent protagonist. Every now and then, Jak does open his mouth as if to utter something important, but Daxter always steps in, supposedly speaking on his behalf. The silence provides ample opportunity for over-the-top physical comedy and jokes – aspects of the Jak franchise that have always been strong. The sequels pay a nice testament to Jak's silent origins, too, with Daxter on occasion stating "Maybe [Jak's] mute, like he used to be".

Link
From: The Legend of Zelda

10 Considering Link's name originally comes from the developer wanting the player to forge a 'link' between themselves and their avatar, it's no surprise that the pointy-eared, green-hatted hero has been kept mute since his first appearance. Over his evolution throughout the franchise, though, Link has gotten steadily more verbal – not necessarily talkative, but more interactive, gaining more of a personality instead of just being a completely blank canvas for the player to draw themself upon. Link does answer questions via player inputs, but it's assumed he's still mute, effectively miming his answers out to the NPCs.



DARK SOULS: DESIGN WORKS

PUBLISHER: **FROM SOFTWARE** PRICE: **£29.99**

BY NOW YOU should've slaughtered your way through From Software's glorious *Dark Souls II* and endured many a death at the punishing hands of its fiendish gaggle of inventive and vividly conceived creatures. Now From Software is giving fans the opportunity to explore the artistry behind the original game.

Originally released in Japan back in 2012, it finally arrives on Western shores some two years later. What it contains is a lavish collection of artwork and interviews that cover the entirety of the haunting world of Lordran. From its distinctive denizens through to its imposing locations, the book is divided up into three sections: Concept Art, Design Materials, and Interview.

The first part has a lot of material you may have seen in the marketing material for the game when it was originally released; however, the much more interesting chapter is Design Materials. Here it delves into exquisite detail about the origins of the world, from its monsters right down to weapons and clothing. There's a huge amount being covered in this section – albeit without much in the way of insight – and given how it pinches some of its most interesting assets – for instance, the unused materials are only given a handful of pages – it could well have spanned another book entirely.

The book concludes with an extensive interview with director Hidetaka Miyazaki and four of the designers that worked on the game. Fans of the series may have already pored over both the translation of the interview and the art online, but the hardback compendium in hardback form is its own trophy, worthy of those that have jumped into From Software's unforgiving gauntlet and emerged victorious the other side.



GCW-ZERO

MANUFACTURER: **GCW** PRICE: **£159.95**

CROWD-SOURCING HAS kickstarted (pun intended) a revolution in independent open-source hardware platforms to come to the market. One of the most recent to have gained a lot of attention and a sizeable following online is the GCW-Zero.

The basic premise is that it enables users to run a host of emulators from NES up until the PlayStation (although, it doesn't come with any emulators pre-installed) and given that it runs on Linux, a whole slew of open-source software is available to run on it. It's pitched as an alternative to current mobile gaming trends, which means it's rather stripped back feature-wise, and for £150, it might be a little too pricey for some tastes.

Despite that, it's clearly a console designed to cater for a specific type of gamer – one who wants to put the effort in and get the most out of what it offers. For those dedicated enough to push its 1GHz processor and 512MB of RAM: install whatever software you like, change the operating system if that's your thing, and use it exclusively to test and play homebrew software. It's a truly open platform, and for those that desire such a thing, the GCW-Zero is a mightily tempting piece of kit.

GAMING CLOTHING



WATCH DOGS IPHONE CASE

Celebrate the release of Ubisoft's multimedia hack-a-thon with this nifty iPhone case. It's ideal for overprotective cyber-terrorists who fret about scratching their hardware.
tinyurl.com/lazfqrd



DOTA 2 PUCK TEE

For the quick-thinking *Dota 2* player, this sharp tee will let your enemies know the very depths of your tactical prowess. Or that you have a particular affinity with weird mouse-fairy-type things.
tinyurl.com/kal6rh3



APERTURE LABS BAG

Want to promote your love for Portal without having to suffer the daily indignity of clothing yourself in an orange jumpsuit? Here's a more subdued option – perfect for huffing around defective turrets.
tinyurl.com/ktq8ub6



RETRO VIDEO GAME CARTRIDGE PILLOW SET

RETAILER: **THINKGEEK.COM** PRICE: **$24.00**

The living room is a dull place to reside, the dreary milieu only breaking on those few occasions that *Jeremy Kyle* is playing on the tellybox. It's much too formal a room, so if you really want to re-address the balance and inject some retro feng shui into your lounge, then what better way to do so than by investing in this fabulous set of Nintendo-inspired cushion cartridges.

The games themselves aren't real – one is titled *Unicorn's Revenge*, the other a less fear-inducing *Lava Jump*; however, these soft, plush pillows most certainly are. A perfect accompaniment to your sofa area/arms/head/arse, these accessories will drag your love of gaming right into the heart of your home and force all of those around you to succumb to its geek chic. Just don't forget to blow on them once you're done.

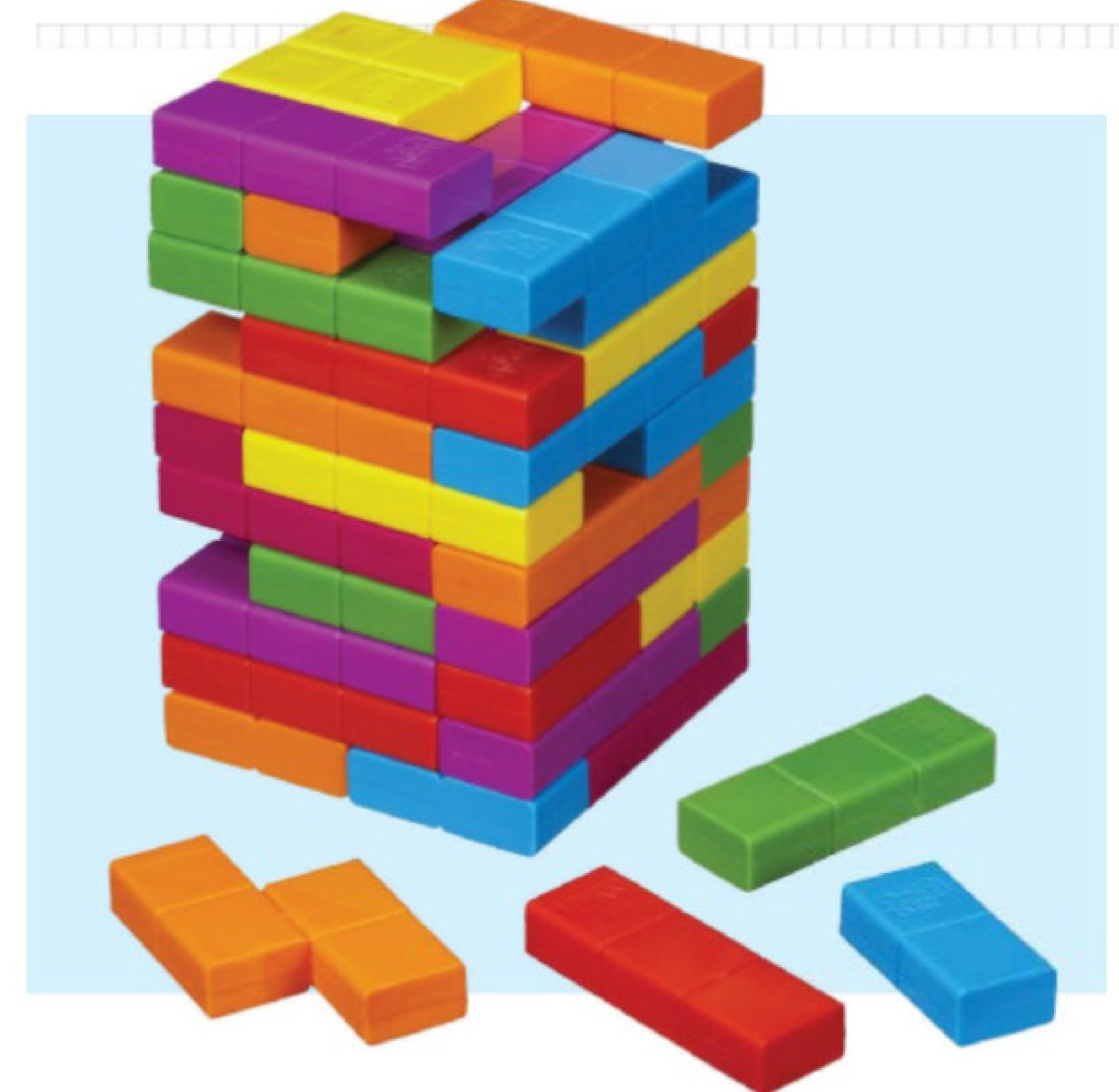
STEELSERIES SENSEI

MANUFACTURER: **STEELSERIES** PRICE: **FROM £78.29**

The everyday mouse isn't the first thing that comes to mind when you think about rapidly evolving gaming technology, but when it comes to pro gaming, the right mouse means serious business. With advanced CPUs, adjustable grips and all manner of other gubbins grafted onto the side of a handheld device, it's no wonder that it's hard to find the right one for you. SteelSeries has a solid reputation with gaming wares and its latest mouse boasts some exceptional tech. A powerful processor beneath its casing powers enhanced sensitivity, while a little LCD screen at its base offers a little added flair.

Although some might complain at the lack of adjustable weights or grips, overall it's a well-balanced mouse, offering a hugely comfortable experience and a range of customisable options that positions it as one of the best pro mice on the market.





TETRIS JENGA

RETAILER: **HASBRO** PRICE: **£14.99**

We don't really need to explain Jenga, but we do feel the need to explain exactly how these two games fit together. (Get it? God, we're funny…) Jenga is the classic game in which you take blocks out of a stack and then proceed to stack them again on top of the pile. *Tetris* is a game involving different shaped blocks that players must direct to create a line, wiping out the row and preventing the stack from getting too high. The two don't really have a huge amount in common aside from the fact that both involve blocks and piles. Yet, rather than just writing the fusion of gaming brands as some cynical marketing gimmick, the use of tetriminos ups the challenge quite significantly, the different shapes giving way to a new level of strategy.

LAST WORDS

Final thoughts from the last person left in the building



KATSUHIRO HARADA

Namco Bandai

Tekken director/producer



We chat to the *Tekken* boss about the success of free-to-play spin-off *Tekken Revolution* and the perils and pitfalls of the F2P market.

Is it fair to say that before launching the game, taking the *Tekken* format and moving it to a free-to-play model could have been seen as something of a gamble?

New challenges like this always entail some risk. This title was the first fighting game to go F2P on a console, and as such, there were many things that I wanted to try to test the possibilities for the future of console games, so I didn't think too much about the risks.

Would you say there are ways to do free titles incorrectly? What did you do to avoid those same mistakes when making *Tekken Revolution*?

There are quite a lot of examples of F2P titles that aren't done correctly. Since it is F2P, you have to realise that 90% of the players aren't going to pay at all, so you have to recover your development costs, server costs, and all operational costs from a few percent of your overall player base, as this is how that business model works. The way you recover costs is very different from that of a retail game, so the idea of "as long as the game is fun, everything will be okay" is not very applicable.

From a user's standpoint, that is the only important thing, but if you're providing a fun and entertaining service for free and not receiving revenue, than you will become unable to continue operation and the user will not have a future for the game to look forward to. So the monetisation has to be carefully thought out from the start, and has to be a good match with what makes the game fun, so the design is quite different from that of a retail game or DLC for such a product as well.

How hard was it to make clear to *Tekken* fans that *Revolution* was a full fighting game for free, rather than a watered-down free game you might see on mobile for example? Was this an easy thing to communicate?

I didn't have much difficulty with this. I guess that's one of the merits of a popular franchise. Having an established history makes it harder to feel new and innovative, but you usually have a core audience that is able to quickly recognises the value in your game. So, if they play the newest instalment and give it their seal of approval, that's usually enough. Having this community is important.

> There are quite a lot of examples of F2P titles that aren't done correctly





Tekken Revolution has been a surprise success for Bandai Namco, racking up over two million downloads.



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